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ANC Short Stories

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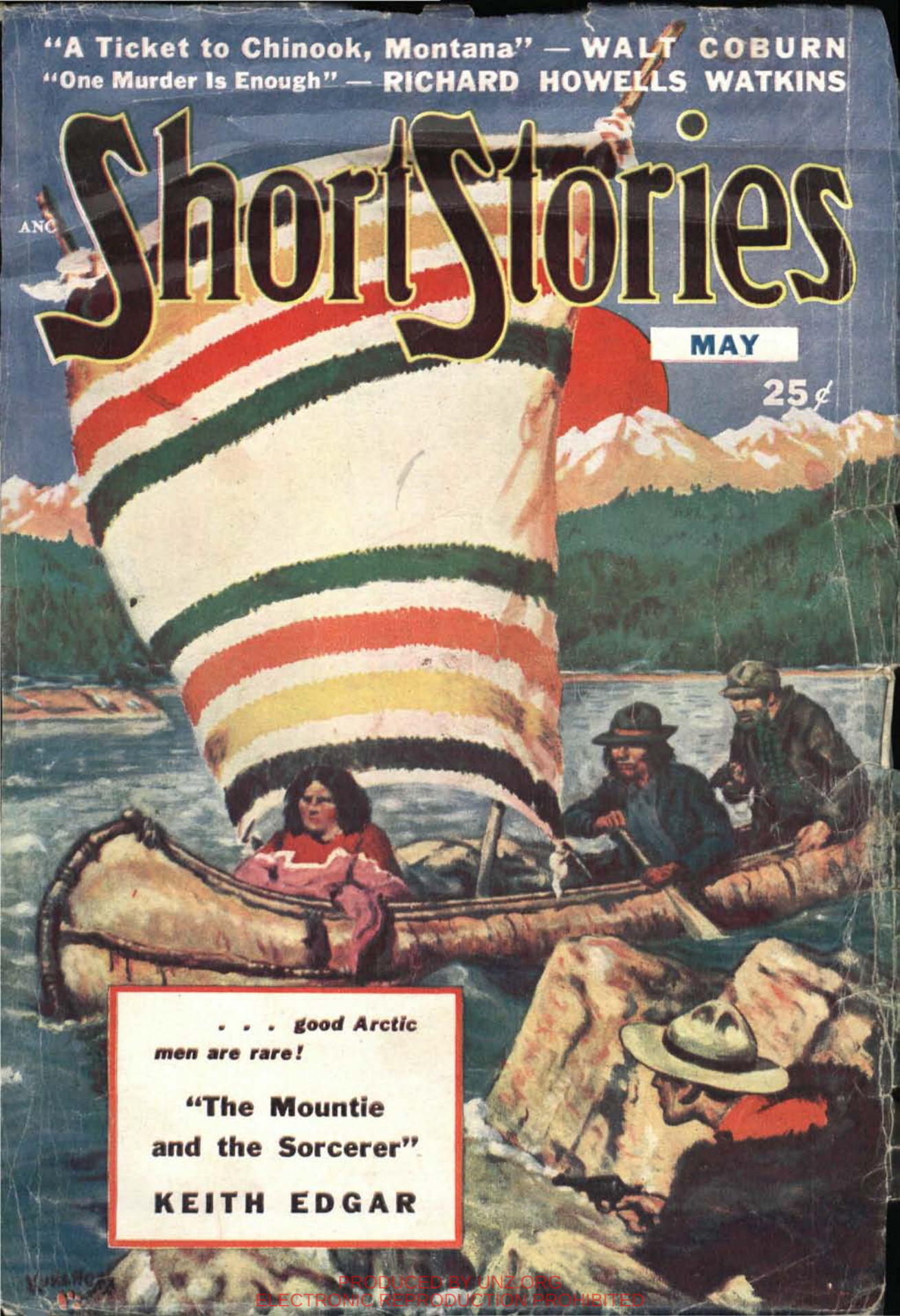

. . . good Arctic men are rare!

"The Mountie and the Sorcerer"

KEITH EDGAR

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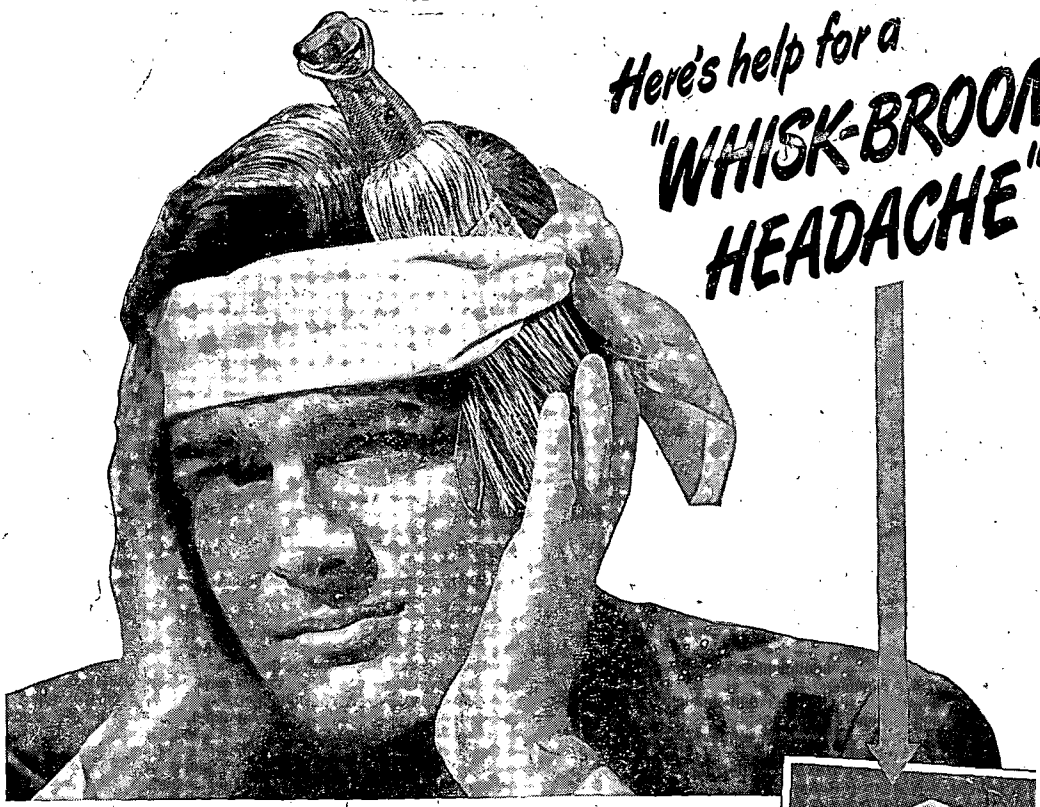

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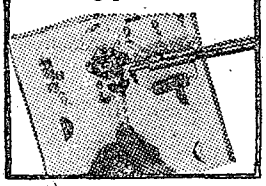

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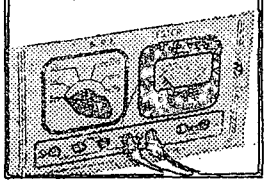

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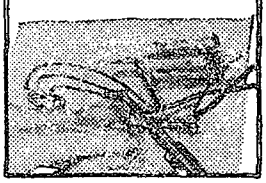

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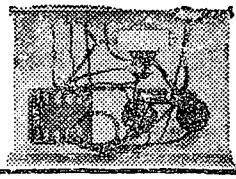

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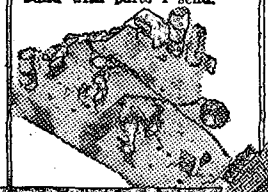

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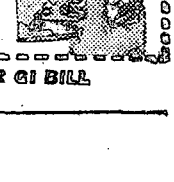

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EDITOR
D. McILWRAITH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
LAMONT BUCHANAN

May, 1949

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EVERY AUTHOR'S FINEST AND LATEST STORIES

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WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer.* M. DELANEY, *Secretary.*

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SINCE the inauguration of George Washington, in 1789, as the first President of the United States, we have had three of our chief executives assassinated—with a couple of unsuccessful attempts on others.

Being interested in the history of guns I was curious to find out just what weapons were used in the commitment of these infamous acts. So I hightailed it to the New York City Public Library (one of the largest and best in the world) thinking that I'd have the information after half an hour or so of research.

How wrong I was!

Abraham Lincoln was the first President of the United States to be assassinated. I knew the make and type of weapon that was used for his murder, but wanted more details. Well, I read about Lincoln for two days. I searched through the complete trial proceedings, including all testimony of the conspirators, newspaper accounts, commentary, etc. Net results—a very poor opinion of the reporting of those days!

Lincoln was murdered in cold blood by John Wilkes Booth. The weapon was designed by Henry Deringer, Jr., a gunsmith whose shop was in Philadelphia. This type of pistol is small with a very short barrel of large caliber. In other words, a short range weapon throwing a large ball of great shocking power. It is interesting to note that Deringer was the first gunsmith in the United States to develop a pistol to use the percussion cap.

These handguns were so popular during the great American era of the Ohio and Mississippi river steamboats that many manufacturers produced imitation Deringers, some going so far as to stamp their product with the word DERRINGER. Notice the two Rs!

In all of the accounts and records that I read concerning Lincoln's death, the murder weapon was referred to as a Derringer!

Eleven days after the assassination, Booth was tracked down by two members of the Military Intelligence. He had taken refuge in a barn, which was immediately surrounded by soldiers, and a fire set when he wouldn't come out and surrender.

At the time, Booth was armed with a repeating carbine (according to the trial records), probably a Spencer, two large revolvers and a seven-inch Bowie knife.

The authorities wanted to take Booth alive but Sergeant Boston Corbett disobeyed orders and killed him with a revolver shot through a crack in the wall of the burning building.

As you no doubt know, the conspirators who were responsible for Lincoln's assassination also planned to liquidate Vice-President Andrew Johnson, William H. Seward, the Secretary of State, and possibly E. M. Stanton, the Secretary of War. And thereby completely paralyze the executive branch of the government on that fateful night of April 14th, 1865.

All of the assassins, with the exception of Booth and Lewis Thornton Powell, alias Lewis Payne, lost their nerve.

Lewis Payne, a 20-year-old giant, was assigned the task of murdering Seward, who was confined to his bed and under the doctor's care, recovering from serious injuries, including a broken jaw, sustained when he was thrown from a carriage.

The assassin gained entrance to the home of the Secretary by introducing himself as a messenger bringing medicine from Dr. Verdi, the physician in charge.

The doorman refused to permit Payne to see Seward, who at the time was asleep. But the young assassin pushed him to one side and started up the stairs. At the top he met Col. Fredrick, Seward's eldest son, who tried to keep him from entering the sick room.

Payne whipped out his cap and ball Whit-

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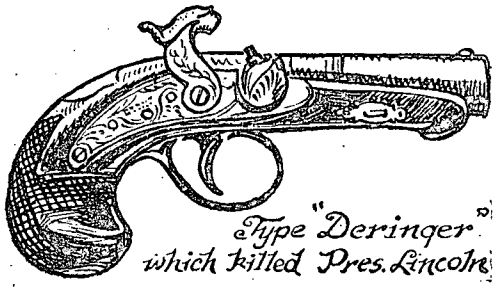
ney Navy Revolver (the accounts written at the time referred to the weapon as a large revolving pistol) and whacked the Colonel a smashing blow on the head, knocking him senseless and fracturing his skull. The loading lever was broken from the revolver and the cylinder pin bent to such an extent that the cylinder was jammed so that the weapon could not be cocked, and thus was useless for shooting.

George Robinson, a soldier-nurse, heard the commotion and stepped out of the sick room. Payne drew his large Bowie-type knife, slashed Robinson across the forehead, then knocked down another attendant and rushed to Seward's bedside and started hacking, trying to cut his throat.



Type "Deringer" which killed Pres. Lincoln

Seward would most certainly have been killed had it not been for a steel framework which the doctor had put on his neck to hold the fractured bone in place.

Payne could not see very well in the darkened bedroom and was quite frantic as Seward had squirmed and rolled to the floor and Robinson, having recovered somewhat from the first blow, had crawled into the room and was trying to pull the assassin off of the Secretary.

At this point another of Seward's sons, Major Augustus, came in and saw the shadow-like figures on the floor. He thought that his father had fallen from the bed, but was surprised to find the three struggling figures. Not realizing what was going on he grabbed Robinson and tried to pull him away. Figuring that his dirty work was done, Payne jumped up and cut down the Major, floored the soldier-nurse with his fist, ran downstairs and outside, where he mounted his horse and made his escape.

Later that evening the young giant was captured. And after being tried in a court of justice, Payne was hanged with the rest of the assassins who had planned the mass killings!

James A. Garfield was the second President of the United States to be assassinated. The fatal shot was fired in the Baltimore and Potomac railroad depot in Washington, D. C., on July 2, 1881, by a 36-year-old mentally unbalanced shyster lawyer named Charles Guiteau.

The weapon used (again according to the accounts of the day) was an old California pistol of extra large caliber, or a heavy revolver with an ivory handle. Your guess is as good as mine. What was it?

Guiteau paid with his life for this completely senseless crime against society!

The third President to be assassinated was William McKinley. He was shot by Leon Cyolgosz (pronounced Tchollgosch), a 28-year-old maniac, in the Temple of Music at the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, N. Y., on September 6, 1901.

Just to get an idea of the type of character this Cyolgosz actually was, let's take a quick look at his background. He was born in Detroit, Mich., and grew up under conditions of extreme poverty. Early in life he became a disciple of Emma Goldman, and from her teachings he learned, among other things, the doctrine of free love, which apparently became the governing factor of his misspent life. What this had to do with his act of murdering McKinley I don't know—but this fact was prominently mentioned in all of the stories I came across, so maybe I missed a point.

Anyway, this young assassin faked an injury by wrapping a dirty handkerchief around his right hand in which he held a small five-shot .32 caliber double-action revolver. He then proceeded to join a group of people waiting in line to shake hands with the President.

When his turn came he shot McKinley twice, once in the chest, and once in the stomach. The stomach shot being the fatal wound.

After being sentenced Cyolgosz was electrocuted.

Yep! Assassination definitely does not pay!

As I mentioned before, I started out with the idea of getting some details of the

(*Continued on page* 18)

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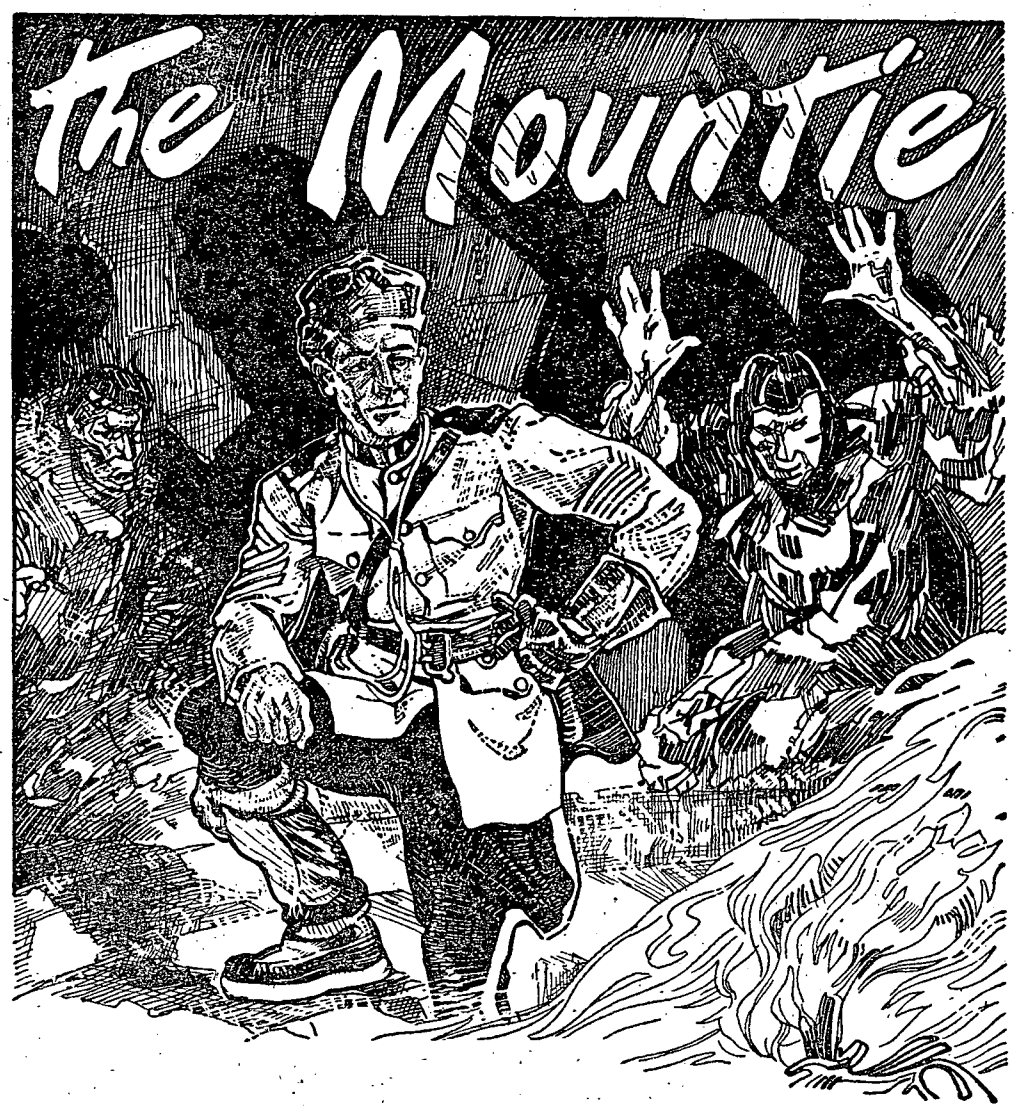

By KEITH EDGAR

WHEN the Lord created Mark Bristow, He did a pretty fair job. The tentative result, some twenty-one years later, with assists from good parents and an assortment of mediocre teachers, was a tall tight-knit young man with crisp brown hair and quizzical blue eyes and a decided penchant for hell-raising. About the time a dire future was being predicted for him, thus nullifying his Creator's efforts, Mark enlisted in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. This formidable body expended considerable sweat and wisdom disciplining his belligerent exuberance and instructing him in the art of representing law and order throughout the vast wilderness under its jurisdiction.

The final result, Constable Mark Bristow of the Mounted, left little to be desired. even in the critical eyes of his superiors. Keen and efficient and handsome, from Strathcona boots to straightbrimmed Stetson, he was equipped, both mentally and physically, to endure the hardship and loneliness of a long patrol in the barrens, to pinch-hit as doctor or mid-wife, to collect taxes and distribute treaty money, to enforce the law among the sometimes recalcitrant inhabitants of the Territories, both native and white, and

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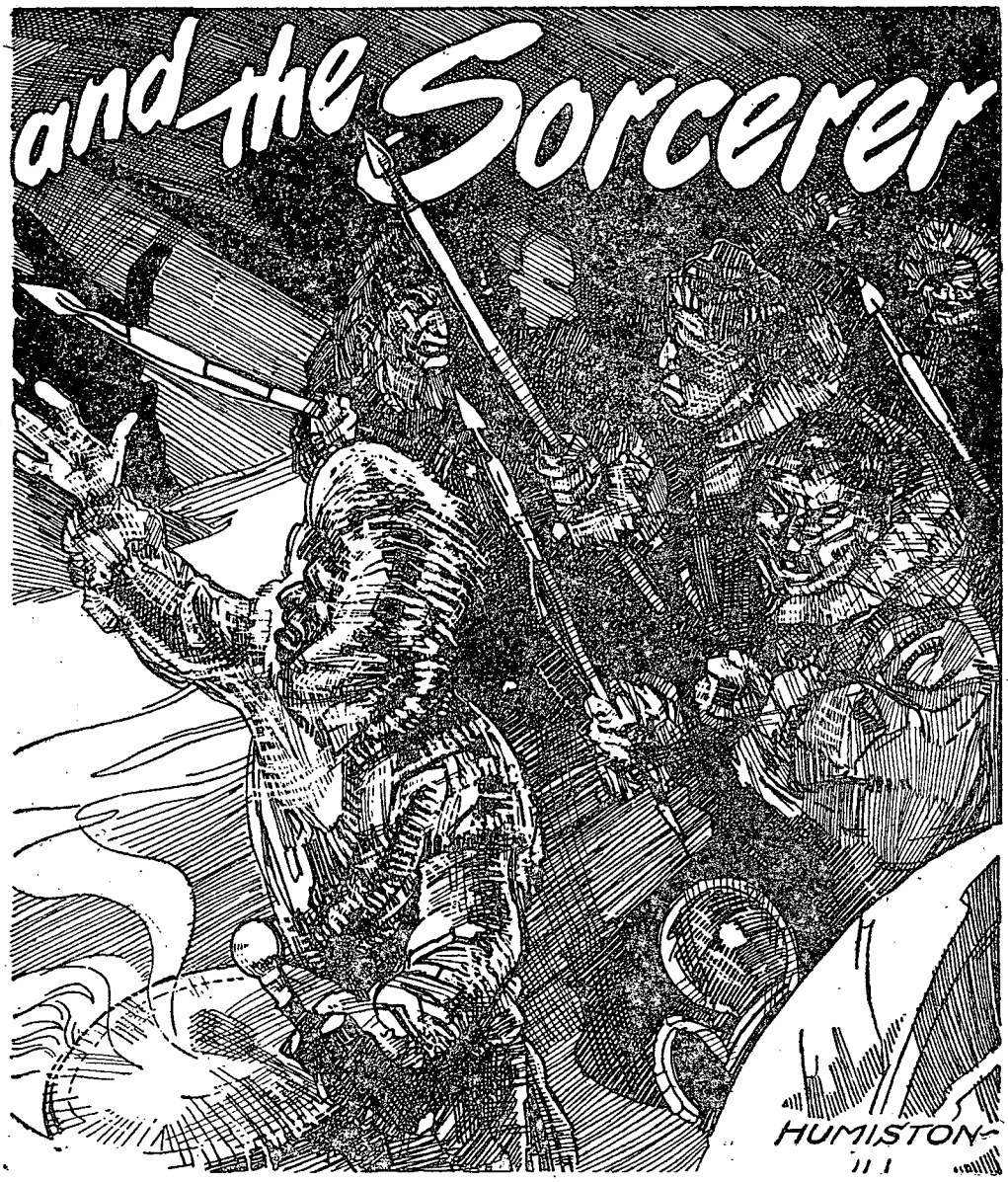

The Sergeant Found Himself Thinking of How He Had Chosen This Far North Patrol on Account of the Peace It Offered to His War Weary Spirit!

to generally uphold the traditions of the Force. They neglected to teach their rookie constable only one thing—how to cope with black magic.

To be sure, it was some time before he was to feel that gap in his training. He completed a three-year stint in the Arctic and acquitted himself well, earning the respect of his Eskimo charges not only by shrewd administration, but also through his willingness to learn their language and way of life. They named him *Usivi'tok*, the Wise One.

Then the war came along and Mark was granted leave of absence to join the Air Force, and a sticky time he had of it, too. But his worst wound was mental, he fell in

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love with an English girl and saw her killed before his eyes during the blitz. Even wars end, however, and Mark finally found himself demobilized and home again.

After some soul-searching he dug his red jacket out of the mothballs and presented himself to Mounted Police Headquarters for re-posting, a bit too lean and fine-drawn perhaps, but otherwise unchanged — outwardly, at least. Now, his superiors were kindly disposed toward their war-heroes, and they offered Mark his choice of posts, either flying one of the Norsemen aircraft with which the Force was being equipped, or a posh embassy job in case he were thinking of getting married.

He politely intimated that he'd rather keep both feet on the ground hereafter, thank you, and that he took a dim view of becoming a picture-book version of a Mountie. The gray-haired Inspector blinked at this and asked him point-blank what he wanted.

"Sir," said Constable Bristow, "I'm bloody well fed up with everything. I'd like to return to the most peaceful people on earth, the Eskimo. I hope you'll understand, sir."

The Inspector understood, and since good Arctic men were rare, Mark was promptly promoted to Sergeant and put in charge of a bleak post on the eastern coast of Victoria Island, three hundred miles north of the Circle in an area sparsely inhabited by the most primitive of Eskimo tribes.

The post consisted merely of a couple of frame buildings, the lumber having been laboriously imported, set snugly in a rocky cove. During the long winter the post would be completely covered with snow, only the stovepipe and radio masts indicating human habitation. From this base Sergeant Bristow and his assistant, young Constable MacGregor, were responsible for the administration of a section of barren lands larger than all the New England states combined.

THE first year or so passed pleasantly enough for Mark. He lost his war-time tensions and settled placidly into a routine existence where the only disturbing element was the weather, and even here Mark had adopted the Eskimo viewpoint of *way-anna* —it doesn't matter. If a storm blew down from the ice cap, then one holed up until the stinging snow ceased to rush past in blinding clouds.

It was just such a day on the eleventh of January last year, and in the snug warmth of the Post Sergeant Bristow was catching up on his reports while Constable MacGregor crouched on the floor sorting supplies for a patrol down the coast with his two native guides.

Above the swish of the wind there was a minor commotion in the outer porch.

MacGregor looked up and commented idly, "Visitors." Mark laid down his pen, hearing the small sounds of Eskimos beating their furs free of the snow before entering.

Then the inner door opened and Utok, a squat round-faced hunter from the local village, stepped in and announced importantly, "*Angu'kar'ulok-oodlar.* An old man comes."

He was followed immediately by a gray-haired native whose brown face was seamed and lined by the fury of many winters. Mark rose and offered his hand, noticing with some surprise that the stranger was wearing a caribou-hide parka cut in the peculiar swallow-tail fashion of the Hirmiut, a primitive tribe currently dwelling well up in the McClintock Channel area, about a week's journey to the north. The old man took his hand, raised it high in a gesture both courtly and apprehensive, and said, "*Natsuk-atka.* I am Natsuk." Mark, in that brief contact, felt fear in the visitor, stark elemental fear.

He asked quietly, "*Nang'iari'yug'tok?* Why are ye fearful?" and led the old man, who seemed to be almost dropping from fatigue, to a bench. Utok, his almond-shaped eyes wary and uneasy, sat beside him. MacGregor went through the ritual of hospitality, pouring tea from the pot on the stove into enamel mugs and opening a tin of tobacco.

Mark sat in a wicker chair opposite the visitors and filled his pipe. There was a feeling of urgency in the air, and the old man had evidently just finished a hard trek, not even stopping for the storm. But he must be patient, direct questioning would only cause Natsuk to withdraw into himself and elicit nothing.

When the two Eskimos had finished their

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tea and rolled cigarettes, Natsuk belched courteously and slowly shook his head. "*Ad'j'ai*! Alas, how terrible!" MacGregor seated himself at Mark's desk, trying to puzzle out the meaning. Being new to the Arctic and a poor linguist, he had not as yet managed a grasp of the language.

Mark asked mildly, "*Suagi'uk?* What is the matter?"

The old man sighed. "*Tokko'jok'arpok.* There is a dead person. *Suga'lung'nek*! Oh, it is very bad! *Angat'kuk-anek'tlaga.* The shaman (sorcerer) invokes evil upon them."

With infinite tact, Mark drew out the information that the shaman of the village had suddenly begun to stir up the tribe to violence, and that already there had been one murder, perhaps more by this time. Would *Usivi'tok*, the Wise One, exorcise this evil?

However there must be more to it than a mere killing, or the old man would not have traveled in such desperate hurry. The *Innuit,* as the Eskimos call themselves, do not ordinarily consider murder a very serious offense, since it is usually in punishment for lying or stealing. The way Natsuk emphasized "evil" seemed to imply sinister ramifications, but try as he could, Mark could not pry any more definite information from him.

He gave up, finally and explained the situation to MacGregor. "You'll have to hold down the post while I chase north and look into this."

MacGregor was disappointed. "Mark, how about letting me tackle it? It sounds like a bit of a do, eh?"

"Maybe. But you haven't got their language through your thick Scotch head, and I can't see you arguing with a rampaging shaman through an interpreter." He turned to Natsuk and said, "*Usivi'tok-ago'tivok.* Usivi'tok gives his consent. He will go."

The elderly Eskimo seemed satisfied and leaned wearily against the wall, closing his eyes. Mark said to Utok, "We will leave tomorrow, you and I together."

Utok's bland eyes were looking up at the ceiling and he shrugged elaborately. "*Peh-'hik'tu'alok.* It is no good for travel."

"*Hilana'go'y'ok-ubla'ko.* It will be nice weather tomorrow morning."

Utok jumped to his feet and smote his forehead. He had just remembered, there was a scarcity of seal in his igloo. He must hunt tomorrow or his family would starve. And, too, there must be extra food for the guest and his dogs. Truly this was a terrible thing, but Usivi'tok would understand, a hunter must not journey afar when his family and guest were without food.

Mark gathered from this that the guide knew more than he was telling, enough to fill him with superstitious fear. And if Utok felt that way about it, so would all the other hunters in the tribe. They were brave enough in the face of ordinary danger, but when it came to opposing a shaman and his black magic, neither threats nor bribery would persuade them. Mark looked again at Natsuk and decided that he was too exhausted to be useful as a guide for several days at least. So he must go alone.

HE ROSE to indicate the end of the interview, laid a hand on the old man's shoulder and said simply, "*Ku'y'auk.* One says thanks." Natsuk raised his patriarchal head and gave him such a look of trust that Mark felt a lump of pride in his throat—pride for those members of the Force before him who had established this faith in their power and justice.

Morning, or the murk which passed for morning in the long winter night, broke calm and cold, and Mark hit the trail early. He was clothed in a complete Eskimo outfit, from sealskin boots and fur trousers to attigê and kulik'tak, the inner and outer parkas of caribou hide. His sled was also Eskimo, a fourteen-foot kamotik, low and sturdy, its iron runners shod with a mixture of ice and mud to cut down friction. Loaded as it was with his own supplies and blocks of frozen fish for the dogs, he could move it easily with his foot. Tucked in the lashings were his rifle, snow knife, shovel and a sealing harpoon. His team of ten king-'mek, the true Arctic dog which is larger than the husky, were harnessed on separate leads so they could fan out ahead of the load. Actually, seven dogs would have been ample for the small kamotik, but by lightening the load per dog Mark could practically double his day's journey, and this seemed to be a case where speed was essential.

Waving goodbye to MacGregor, Mark snapped the long walrus-hide whip and shouted "Whee'at!" and the dogs lunged

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into their traces, starting off in a clamorous gallop. Mark jumped aboard and rode until they were out of sight of the post and the igloo village, at which point the dogs, having made their prideful departure, settled down to a mile-consuming trot. Mark left the sled and ran alongside the leader.

The snowscope was wan, formless, and without perspective or dimension. Although he could see a long distance, even to where the grayish star-filled sky dipped down to the sea ice, close at hand it was difficult to distinguish obstructions. Mark kept well up alongside the leader in order to keep the sled from coming to grief, calling "Ra!" or "Houk!" to swing them right or left. They were following the level stretch of sea ice between the shore and the high pressure ridges of pack ice further out. The dogs were holding a fast clip, but Mark felt no fatigue, only a boundless energy. The air was so dry and cold and invigorating that he seemed to run without effort, only slowing the dogs when he began to perspire, for perspiration freezes in the clothing and destroys its insulating value. That way lies death.

Hour after hour he held this pace, his body feeling like a tireless machine, concentrating on avoiding jagged ice lest he tear his boots, or rip the coating off the sled runners. Shortly after the mid-day stop for tea the sky began to take on a silvery glow. Far out over the frozen sea the moon was rising. Soon the brilliant disc pushed over the horizon until it was flooding generous light on the ice, throwing the hummocks into sharp relief, making travel an effortless pleasure. He was able to move out farther from the shore, following a winding path among the pressure ridges. And all about them was the stupendous silence of the Arctic.

TIME, as such, ceased to exist. In the space of a few hours Mark slipped through a metamorphosis from a civilized policeman to an Eskimo nomad. Although he had left the post at eight a.m. by the clock, he was now considering his day by the orbit of the moon, for only with its light could he travel swiftly. When the moon set, he halted the team by a large drift and built a small igloo, cutting the blocks expertly with his snow-knife in the Eskimo manner, with a low porch for the dogs, and an iglerk, a sleeping platform, inside for himself. Next morning he did not start until the moon again rose, and for five days he traveled northward in this fashion, blessed with clear weather and no wind to make travel a torture, as so often happened.

Toward the end of the fifth day, rounding a mountainous pressure ridge, he came suddenly on sled marks and knew he was near his objective. Presently other tracks joined the first, like the railroad lines converging near a city, and the dogs began to yelp excitedly and break into a gallop. Mark leapt onto the sled and they rocketed into the village of perhaps two dozen large igloos glittering in the yellow light.

For a few minutes there was a terrific din and confusion as the village dogs undertook to challenge Mark's more than willing team, and fur-clad figures plunged among them with whips and finally restored a semblance of order.

He knew at once that something was wrong. The arrival of a stranger at an Eskimo village is a great event, and they cluster around, from the oldest man to the youngest child, for a great ceremony of hand-shaking. They inquire politely if the stranger is tired, if he has come far, and if he is going to honor them with a long visit. Several of the older men of the village will vie for the favor of having him a guest, and there will be eager suggestions about a feast. The visitor will hand out small gifts, usually tobacco, and then the hospitable Eskimo will pitch into the task of building the visitor an igloo and caring for his dogs. Women of the village will examine his clothes to see if they need mending or if his boots need chewing. There is no hospitality as thorough and heartfelt as that of the Innuit.

But instead of cheerful smiles, Mark found himself facing a ring of sullen suspicious hunters, all armed with either harpoons or rifles. He noticed the women of the village hurriedly collecting their children and rushing them out of sight into the igloos. There were far too many men in evidence, they should have been out sealing in this weather.

Mark threw back the hood of his parka and a sigh went through the group, and one

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word was passed from end to end of the village, "Kabluna. A white man."

Mark said *"Usivi'tok-atka-pol'akpak.* I am Usivi'tok of the Police come to visit."

A man pushed through the group to face him, while the others stepped aside respectfully, murmuring, *"Angai'huk'tai'gok."* Our shaman has arrived."

THE shaman was a stocky Eskimo dressed in the finest of furs. The hood of his parka was trimmed with rare wolverine, its tribal swallow-tail and sleeve cuffs edged with white fox, the sealskin mittens and boots lavishly decorated. His oily black hair hung down over heavily-lidded mongolian eyes that glittered with animosity. He was not young, and yet not old, with a stringy fringe of beard on his chin, and his confident swagger bespoke an authority unusual among the communal Innuit. This, then, was the sorcerer with whom he must deal.

The shaman said, "Our village is poor and we can not welcome the stranger." It was a clear invitation to get out immediately.

Mark replied carefully, choosing his words. "Behold, I have heard it said by the Innuit that the Hirmiut have no more men, that all the men of the Hirmiut have turned into women. It is said that the Hirmiut do not hunt or fish because their evil shaman has stolen their manhood. Truly the Innuit do not lie. I see no men."

There were indignant murmurs in the crowd. The shaman raised both arms above his head and screeched furiously, *"Tokko-'vik-kablunat!* This is a place of death for white men!"

Mark ignored the shaman and turned to address the crowd. He said firmly, "There will be a council. We will discuss many things. I, Usivi'tok of the Police, say it." Giving them a pitying smile which caused them to shuffle in embarrassment, he yanked his snow knife from the sled and strode to a nearby drift to cut blocks for an igloo.

Pretending to ignore them, Mark went about his task silently, but he noticed that the villagers were gathered in a group about the shaman. Mark was worried because the tribe's sorcerer had dared to openly threaten him, and this meant that he was uncommonly sure of himself. What happened next depended upon whether the shaman had managed to entirely destroy the prestige of the police.

Presently a couple of old men joined in the building of his snow house, and then three more diffidently added their assistance to the construction in a shame-faced manner, as if apologizing that this should be necessary.

When the igloo was finished, Mark invited them in for tea, and they uneasily assented, helping him move his equipment inside, feeding his dogs, and staking the team well away from the village animals. Mark lit his primus stove, placed on it a pot of chopped ice and then passed out presents of tobacco. The Eskimos, all old men, squatted on the skin-covered iglerk and smoked silently.

When the ice was melted Mark threw a handful of tea into the pot and said chidingly, "Truly this I do not understand. At other villages the Innuit hold a feast when the Police come, and there are many gifts. Truly it is a sad thing indeed when a visitor must build his own igloo." His guests stared intently at their mukluks, so he served the tea without further comment.

Being hungry, Mark opened a can of beef stew and put it on the stove. Then, as an afterthought, he opened more tins for his guests. They ate the stuff greedily, scooping it from the cans with their fingers and curiously examining the colored labels while they belched in usual polite appreciation.

When they had eaten, Mark passed around tobacco again, then filled his pipe and lit it, saying nothing.

Presently one of the old men, who had identified himself as Tulugak, began to speak hesitantly. "Truly, Wise One of the Police, much evil has come to us. Before we were old it was different. A servant of the Great Spirit visited us often and taught about the God of the kablunat. He did not understand our ways, but he was kind, and we listened. And the Police visited us often to cure our sick and teach us the law of the kablunat, and they understood our ways. They told us it was evil to kill our old people, and when the hunting was bad so that we could not feed our aged, the Police gave us food." He paused and seemed to stare inwardly at himself, his weathered face withdrawn and sad, while the others swayed

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forward in unison and murmured, *"Aha-'marik.* Yes, it is indeed so."

Their spokesman roused and rolled another cigarette from the tin on the iglerk, saying slowly, "Truly the Hirmiut were great among the Innuit. Our women were well fed, our children were strong and the Ice Gods brought us many seal. There was great happiness in the igloos of the Hirmiut."

And the others swayed affirmatively *"Aha'marik!"*

His voice rose to a wail. *"Nâ-âk!* Oh woe, oh agony! The Great Spirit sent a new shaman to the Hirmiut."

Mark's eyebrows went up. So the shaman was not a member of the tribe? He asked, "From whence came this shaman?"

"Truly, this is a wonderful thing, Usivi-'tok of the Police. Our shaman came from the moon."

"From the moon?"

"It is indeed so. In the night he came, with a great storm. And we know he came from the moon, for in the morning he was there, with no king'mek or kamotik, crying out that he was sent to dwell among us and teach us the will of the moon-spirit."

Mark whistled under his breath. Who was he then? A renegade cast out from another tribe for violating its taboos? A renegade ejected from his tribe minus dogs and equipment to die on the Arctic wastes? Probably. And unwilling to die, he had trekked across the ice-cap to this village and turned his extremity to advantage, playing on their superstitious fears to provide a good living for himself.

Tulugak sighed and went on in a low tone, as if fearful of being overheard. "There are some of us who do not believe that our shaman does the will of the Spirit. There are some of us who do not believe that it is right to kill the old and infirm. But the young men believe, and soon there will be no old or infirm among the Hirmiut."

MARK coaxed out of him what facts he could, and they were bad. Within the past month three old people, a man and two women—one of them the aged wife of Natsuk, the other the wife of Tulugak, ill and nearly blind—had been led out to an open lead in the ice and pushed into the water. He learned, too, that the shaman was rousing the young men up to the point where they would murder all the old and infirm of the village in one final orgy of killing. Mark guessed that this was because the older people did not accept his authority with much enthusiasm and he wanted to remove opposition as quickly as possible.

He said flatly, "Go forth and say to the shaman from me, Usivi'tok of the Police, that he is a liar, that he has no Spirit. Say to the shaman that he has sinned against the law of the Kablunat and that he must be punished." The old men looked at him uneasily, but remained silent.

Finally one of them spoke. "There will be a council. Let Usivi'tok of the Police attend the council and speak these words to the shaman."

Mark rose to his feet. *"Alie'nai-ka'ne-rame.* Truly I will speak thus."

They filed out of the igloo, dropping to hands and knees at the low entrance and crawling through one at a time. Tulugak remained to the last, to shake his head and say, "The shaman has a powerful magic. His Spirit has a great anger."

Mark reassured him. "The anger of the Police is greater than the anger of the ice-gods when they send the mighty blizzard. Your shaman will do well to fear the anger of the Police."

When he was alone, Mark sat on the iglerk and thought about it. Just another damned little dictator throwing his weight around, using ruthless methods to attain his power. His natural impulse was to simply slap handcuffs on the shaman and march him out of the camp. But the way things stood now there'd be trouble, perhaps bloodshed. The young hunters would align themselves with the shaman and Mark would be lucky to escape at all. No, first he must break the shaman's grip on these people, expose him as a liar and a fraud.

It was then Mark noticed that he was sitting on the iglerk in the stiff-legged manner of the Eskimo, and that he was actually thinking half in Eskimo. "Hell," he said aloud. "I'd better change back into a policeman."

He opened his equipment box and drew out his red uniform jacket and blue breeches with the gold stripe. He stripped off the furs and dressed in the uniform, except for hat and boots. He hadn't brought his Stet-

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son, and the leather boots would be abominably cold. So he pulled on his knee-high sealskin boots, buckled on his revolver, shoved a flashlight into his hip pocket to warm the batteries, and sat down to wait.

The moon was setting when someone spoke outside his igloo. *"Tikki'pok.* One will come."

When he straightened, out in the cold air, Mark looked up at the sky where a tremendous display of the Aurora Borealis was waving celestial draperies of purple and red and yellow and green in an awesome symphony of color. He watched it for a moment, his breath billowing out in ghostly clouds in the eerie light, waiting until his anger had cooled. Anger against the renegade who had brought violence and death and dissension to this peaceable tribe. After a moment, he turned to follow his guide, a young hunter carrying a harpoon. Mark shook his head at this business of carrying arms in the village, so unlike the Innuit, and began to suspect that he was in for a bit more trouble than he'd counted on.

The council house was a newly-built igloo of great size, being some thirty feet in diameter, and most peculiar, the dome was covered with skins making it a dark blob in the sparkling snow and ice.

He stooped to follow his guide through the low door and found himself facing a semi-circle of fur-clad men sitting on an iglerk which ran little more than halfway around the igloo. On the side nearest the door a dozen men were standing, holding harpoons upright in the manner of a Roman guard. Mark thought with a sniff that the shaman had introduced modern methods into his dictatorship.

As he entered the council-house in his red coat, a sigh passed through the assembly. So, his uniform still carried a bit of weight. Mark strode to the center where a single seal-oil lamp glowed on the floor, filling the place with yellow shadows. He said formally, "I, Usivi'tok of the Police, have come to the council." Before he could make a speech, his guide took his arm and indicated that he was to stand back with the guard.

Mark turned and looked slowly and amusedly at the armed hunters. He said contemptuously, *"Ara'nat!* Women!"

He walked across to the iglerk and motioned for a space to be made for him in the center, beside Tulugak and some other old men of the village.

Mark was hardly settled on the caribou hides, feeling the cold chill through his uniform, when the shaman entered and stood in front of the lamp so that his features were made diabolical by the low-placed flickering flame. He stared at Mark in malevolent silence and Mark stared right back at him. The shaman was carrying a drum, a large hoop over which had been stretched a scraped hide. He began to beat the drum with a knuckle bone, holding it high in front of him.

First he beat it slowly, letting the dull boom reverberate around the dome, then the rhythm increased until their ears were aching with the rolling thunder. The shaman gradually softened his blows until his voice could be heard chanting some unintelligible song.

The sorcerer rolled up his eyes, thrust the drum straight out in front of him and began to jerk convulsively. He swayed from side to side and his chant rose to a screech. Mark made out his sentences with difficulty. Something about the Spirit speaking to his servant. Then the shaman adopted a listening attitude, perfectly still. Silence congealed in the council-house.

The shaman started to nod, as if in agreement, and the chanting began again, this time distinctly.

"The gods are angry, for a stranger, a kabluna, has come among you to harm the servant of the gods. The gods say you must kill the kabluna to appease their anger. Unless you kill the kabluna the gods will take away the *pui'jik,* the seal, and the Hirmiut will die of the hunger sickness. The gods say to kill! Kill! Kill!"

The armed men around the door began to stamp their feet and chant in unison, "We shall kill the kabluna!"

Mark was no longer cold. He was perspiring. He hadn't expected the sorcerer to take such a direct offensive.

The shaman halted the chanting with upraised arms, but before he could speak again, Mark laughed, loud and long, with what he hoped was convincing merriment. When he had their shocked attention, he said in a flat tone, *"Angat'kuk-pitsil'era!* The shaman lies!"

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The shaman raised his drum, but Mark clapped his hands loudly and nodded his head, shouting in a voice that was a mockery of the shaman's chant, "Ai-ai! I too have a spirit! Behold, I listen to my spirit!" He nodded his head in exact imitation, then laughed. *"Aha! Aha!* Yes! Yes! My spirit tells me that the shaman has no spirit, that he is a liar. *Anek'tlaga!* He invokes evil by pretending!" Mark grinned directly at the shaman then looked around. On the brown faces he saw startled incredulity, hope and fear.

The shaman's eyes were glittering with hatred. He started to speak but Mark snapped, "Be quiet! I, Usivi'tok of the Police say to the council that this man is no shaman, he has no spirit. I will take him away from the Hirmiut when the moon rises. I have spoken."

A voice across the igloo said quietly, "The kabluna speaks with the tongue of a fool. Our shaman is mighty with the Spirit. He is our shaman sent from the moon, and only the moon can take him away."

Mark smiled cynically around at them, trying to get some response, but there was none. They were afraid. He said, *"Na-'mak'to.* Very good. Let this liar prove that he has a spirit."

He wanted to jump down from the iglerk and smash the shaman in the face, to beat him thoroughly and drag him out of the council. But his police training restrained him. Always it had been dinned into him to avoid violence, to exert his authority through the prestige of his uniform and his supposedly superior intelligence.

But now the prestige of the uniform was challenged by a greasy sorcerer who exerted his power through what the Innuit considered supernatural magic. Since this "council" was apparently going to be a contest between him and the sorcerer, his word against superstitious awe, it was too bad he hadn't been taught some simple conjuring. But Mark's ability in this line was limited to a few juvenile card tricks, and even if he had a deck of cards they would mean nothing to the Eskimo.

In the minds of the Innuit, their shaman was the more potent and the more feared because he was evil. Or rather, the spirits for which he was the mouth-piece were evil. By threatening death or poor hunting he was far more quickly obeyed than if he had promised long life and good hunting.

While Mark was turning this over in his mind the shaman was busy going into another trance, the rolling boom of the drum adding to the tension of the council. Suddenly the drumming stopped and the shaman listened, shaking his head, then nodding. He began to chant, "The Spirit of the moon summons me. My spirit is going on a visit to the moon but my body will remain here. I go—" His voice trailed off and his body was rigidly upright in the center of the igloo. There was a whisper around the circle. "Our shaman's spirit has left us to journey to the moon."

Mark said loudly, "I did not hear his spirit depart."

He was immediately shushed by several indignant Innuit. Mark stepped down off the iglerk—and immediately found himself facing a dozen levelled harpoons. He looked steadily at the guard and saw sheer fanatic devotion, instant death if he laid a finger on the shaman now. Mark smiled casually and nodded, turned aside and walked to the entrance. The guard did not hinder his going.

Outside in the keen cold air he drew a deep breath and looked up at the spangled sky. The Aurora had disappeared and the village glittered in the starlight like a dreamland fantasy. Then his glance fell on the council house and suddenly it occurred to him why the snow blocks had been covered with skins. There was going to be a seance in absolute darkness, and the skins were to prevent light from seeping through the translucent dome.

He strode to his own igloo, thinking hard. Inside he lit his kerosene lantern and examined his equipment. Somehow he must produce magic, and very potent magic. Mark opened his medicine chest and scratched his jaw. Wait—this bottle of ether. The police carried a small amount of the anesthetic for aiding in difficult childbirth or setting a bone, or even for an emergency operation. Perhaps, when the dark seance was in progress he could use the ether to render the shaman completely unconscious. It would be simple then to claim that the shaman's spirit had departed forever—was he not obviously in the long

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sleep? Could any of the council awaken him? Maybe he could get the shaman out of the camp while he was still unconscious and carry him back to the post in handcuffs. Worth trying. He slipped the bottle into a jacket pocket along with a pad of gauze and returned to the council-house.

As he stepped through the low door, Mark found the shaman's spirit had returned to his body and he was describing his visit to the moon. The audience leaned forward breathlessly, drinking in his words with open-mouthed wonder.

The shaman was saying, "And the spirit of the moon said to his servant, truly there are doubters among the Hirmiut. Therefore let my servant fly to the moon in his own body!"

And all the Innuit nodded their heads and breathed, *"Ittuki'arrata!* Oh, how wonderful!"

The shaman shook both arms above his head and screeched, "Truly the spirit of the moon said to his servant that this shall be done, and let there be no more doubters among the Hirmiut—for doubters shall die along with the kabluna who profanes our sacred council! I will now fly to the moon in my own body!" He swung round to face Mark who was standing quietly to one side, and said with savage ferocity, *"Kabluna-tok-'aark'augok.* White man, prepare to die."

MARK looked down into his mongolian eyes, bright with malicious confidence and an almost insane sense of power. It was warm in the snow-house, the heat of many bodies had raised the temperature until there was a drip of water from the top of the dome. But the tight feeling of his collar and the beads of sweat running down his neck were not caused by the temperature. There was an almost hypnotic sense of demonic evil in the close air. Mark forced a grin to his face, telling himself that it was silly for him, who had faced death in a hundred forms in Europe, to allow himself to be bothered by a lot of primitive mumbo-jumbo. But his knees were not as steady as they might have been when he shrugged and crossed to his place on the iglerk and settled down with an air of waiting to see the show.

It began immediately. The shaman stripped off all his clothes except fur trousers and mukluks, leaving him naked to the waist. One of his "guard" then produced a length of sealskin rope. The shaman sat on the floor with his chin on his knees and he was thoroughly trussed. Mark watched closely for trick tying, but the Eskimo doing the knotting went about his task with naive enthusiasm until it was patently impossible for the shaman to move. The only unusual feature was that a short length of rope was left dangling from his hands between his knees, and to the end of this a heavy stone was tied.

This ceremony completed, the seal-oil lamp was snuffed out and the council-house blanketed with impenetrable darkness.

The shaman began to chant a magic song, which admonished the audience to cover their eyes lest they die from a chance sight of the awful thing which was about to happen.

Presently his chant deepened and he began to pant, "I do not feel so heavy now! I am not sitting so heavily upon the floor! Now I am becoming light as the wind! Now I am beginning to rise like a fish in water!"

A faint whizzing sound became noticeable and the shaman's voice was more indistinct. "I am rising! I am rising!" The whizzing was louder. "I am beginning to fly in circles, slowly, just above the floor!"

Mark strained his eyes and his ears and he was almost certain that he could see a dim shape weaving around the igloo. The hairs on the back of his neck tingled.

"Now I am flying fast! Now I am flying faster! I am about to fly right out of the earth to the moon!" The whizzing was rising to a pitch where it sounded like an angry wasp, and the shaman's voice seemed to come from high up in the dome. Mark's aching eyes thought he could discern a moving shape over the level of his head. A chill traveled down his spine.

Unable to stand the suspense any longer, he fumbled for his flashlight and shone it up into the dome. There was nothing in the focus of the beam. He swung the light down—and sucked in his breath.

The shaman was still sitting in the center of the igloo, on the floor, motionless except for the bound hands which were whirling the stone between his legs, producing the whizzing sound, while his ventriloquistic chant became fainter and fainter.

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Mark laughed aloud in sheer relief and played the light around the audience. To a man they were rigid, holding their hands tight over their eyes.

He saw the spasm of horror cross their faces at his outburst and he laughed again, harshly, fumbling in his pockets for a match. He was suddenly shaking with rage.

"Ai-ai!" He shouted. "The magic of Usivi'tok of the Police is more powerful than the shaman! Behold, I command the shaman to return to the council! I forbid him to fly to the moon! The spirit of the moon has told me that the shaman is a liar and he casts him off! Return, oh shaman, and be punished by the Police for these lies!"

Mark jumped down from the iglerk, scratched the match on the stone bowl and re-lit the seal-oil lamp. Then he picked up the bound shaman, lifted him high over his head, shouted, "Return, oh liar!" and hurled him into the ranks of his guard.

For a few seconds there was pandemonium, with the guards scrambling to their feet in scared haste and the shaman shrieking, "Kill the kabluna!" and the other members of the council screaming *"Nâ'âk!* Oh woe!" in superstitious terror.

The bound shaman was rolling on the floor howling, "Kill! Kill!" and the armed hunters jumped around Mark brandishing their harpoons, while those on the iglerk chattered with unholy fear.

Mark knew that he had blundered, and he took refuge in a pose which had stood him in good stead on more than one occasion when facing mobs, although none had been worked up to such a frenzy as this. He planted his feet apart, hooked his thumbs in his belt and froze his face into a hard implacable mask. It had been his experience that such a belligerent posture caused riot-bent parties to hesitate, thus giving him time enough to think his way out of the predicament.

Why in hell hadn't he kept his temper and followed his original plan? Oh, sure, he'd blown up because he'd almost been taken in himself by this tomfoolery, and it hurt his ego. And now, they would hack him to pieces if he didn't do something quick.

The fingers of his right hand, gripping his belt, twitched for his revolver. But if he used his gun there would be the devil to pay. He could justifiably shoot the shaman, but that would only make the sorcerer a martyr and cause more harm than ever.

The shaman was still urging them to kill, and some of the more hardy souls were brandishing their harpoons in his face, working up courage for the deed. Only his stony silence gave them pause—that and the long-established prestige of his red coat.

Mark raised a hand and roared, *"Kannok-'tok!* Silence!"

The chattering trailed off until only the shaman still screeched, rolling on the floor. Mark put a foot on his face and snapped, "Quiet, thou liar!"

He produced the bottle of ether from his pocket and held it high, turning it so that the glass caught the flickering light from the lamp.

"Aha'ak! Behold!"

He had their attention now. They stared curiously at this thing which looked like ice but which was not ice.

Mark took a deep breath and said, "I, Usivi'tok of the Police, have heard about this man who called himself a shaman of the Hirmiut. This shaman who has brought you poor hunting and stolen your manhood. The Police have learned that the Hirmiut have no true spirit to guide them in the ways that are right."

He continued to turn the bottle, holding it high, riveting their attention on it and thinking furiously, trying to reach into their minds for the very words he must tell them.

"Usivi'tok-ekru'tsek. Usivi'tok of the Police is angry. Have not the Police always been the friend of the Hirmiut? Have not the Police healed your sick? Have not the Police given you food when the caribou were not to be found and your igloos were cold with the hunger-sickness? Have not the Police forbidden you to kill?"

He had their complete attention now, their eyes were staring at the bottle and the shaman was momentarily forgotten. They nodded their heads in unison, *"Aha'takka!* Indeed, it is so!"

Mark lowered his voice to a fatherly tone. "Truly, the Police have a great anger that the Hirmiut should sin thus, but the anger of the Police is filled with mercy and understanding."

He knew now what he was going to do,

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and he took another deep breath, wondering vaguely what headquarters would think about it.

"The Police knew that the Hirmiut need the guidance of a good spirit, so I, Usivi'tok of the Police, have brought you a spirit—here—in this thing I hold in my hand."

He swung slowly around so that all might look, and the guards licked their lips and backed away, out of range of the bottle.

The shaman shrieked that this was a lie.

Mark looked down at him, then spoke to one of the armed hunters. "Release the pretender from his bonds that he may examine this spirit."

The sorcerer was untied and rose stiffly to his feet, his face ugly. Mark held out the bottle to him and said, "Oh, shaman, examine this thing that I hold and tell me if there is indeed a spirit therein."

The shaman, now that he was loose, was regaining confidence, Mark could see it in his eyes. When the sorcerer stepped forward to peer at the bottle, Mark slipped out the stopper and shoved the neck of the bottle under his nose.

The shaman gagged and jumped quickly backward, chattering incoherently, his eyes wide with surprise and fright.

"Ai-ai!" laughed Mark. "The spirit frightens this shaman! Here, liar of a shaman, grasp the spirit!" He held out the bottle again and the shaman backed off, shaking his head.

And all the Innuit chanted, *"Alin'gin-'akfa-tur'nrak!* Oh, what a powerful spirit!"

Mark raised his voice. "Behold, I will listen to this spirit." He held the bottle close to his ear and nodded his head. Then he looked around the council, as if incredulous.

"Truly, this is a most wonderful thing, oh men of the Hirmiut. The spirit has spoken to me thus, that it wishes to live with the Hirmiut and council them in a wise manner."

The Innuit bobbed their heads. *"Ittuki-'arrata!* Oh, how wonderful!"

Mark held the bottle close to his ear again, and again nodded solemnly.

"Behold, the spirit has told me that it wishes to dwell in the body of Tulugak!" All the heads turned toward Tulugak the old man, who looked first surprised, then proud.

Mark pointed to the hunters near the door and said, "Go quickly and bring blocks of snow." They rushed outside immediately. When they returned carrying large blocks, he directed them to build a sort of dais in the center of the council-house. Then he said, "Oh, Tulugak, come and lie on this, that I may cause the spirit to enter you."

The old man came forward hesitantly, and Mark saw that he was shaking with fear. He laid a hand on Tulugak's shoulder and said kindly, "Truly, you must fear not, for this is a great honor."

WHEN the old man was lying stretched on the raised platform, Mark began to chant in a sing-song, while making a ceremony of opening the bottle, placing the pad of gauze over the nose and mouth of the frightened Tulugak and dripping the ether onto it.

"Oh, Tulugak, receive this mighty spirit and listen to his voice. Go thou on a spirit-voyage to a far place and acquire wisdom that ye may tell these wonders to the Hirmiut. Let this spirit enter into you and make your heart great with love that you may teach the Hirmiut the just law of the kablunat." Watching closely, he saw the quaking old body relax, and he lowered his voice insistently, trying to plant these thoughts into the semi-conscious brain. The moment Tulugak seemed to be under, Mark removed the pad and tossed it negligently on the floor, dropping the stoppered bottle back into his pocket.

He turned to the wide-eyed council and said, "Tulugak has gone on a spirit journey. Soon he will return." He hooked his thumbs in his belt and waited with an appearance of great confidence. Everything depended upon whether Tulugak's primeval subconscious had been receptive—or whether his fear of the shaman was still controlling his mind.

The sorcerer was watching with baffled eyes, torn between his own precarious situation and the urgent need for action to restore his authority—and his instinctive fear of the supernatural. With a visible effort which Mark, knowing his thoughts, could not help but admire, the shaman approached the dais and said, "Hoo! Stop! This is a pretense. Tulugak tries to fool his broth-

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ers." Gaining courage when Mark made no move to interfere, he reached forward and prodded the inert old man. Tulugak did not stir. The shaman cautiously reached out a hand and shoved back an eyelid—then jumped back, muttering under his breath.

A sigh passed around the igloo.

The old man lay so still that for a moment Mark was chilled by misgiving. Had he administered too much ether? After all, there had been no way to test the strength of the tired old heart.

Then Tulugak stirred and moaned.

The Innuit breathed softly, "He returns!"

WHEN the old man's eyes flicked open, Mark, hoping fervently that the anesthetic wouldn't make him sick at this crucial moment, raised Tulugak to his feet and said coaxingly, "Speak! Tell the Hirmiut what wonders the spirit has shown you!"

The old man, still on the borderline of consciousness, wavered on his legs and Mark had to steady him, but he spoke in a trembling voice. "Truly this is a most marvelous thing! As the spirit entered into me I felt my own unworthy spirit whirl around and around, down to a great depth under the earth where there was a mighty light. As it is truly known, the Sun rests during the long winter under the earth, and I saw that I was indeed in the presence of the Sun. And the Sun said unto me in a loud voice, *'Tulugak, I am angry with my people the Hirmiut! They have listened to a false shaman and turned to evil! Let the Hirmiut therefore cast out this false shaman and obey the just law of the kablunat, that the Hirmiut might again be great among the Innuit!'* Thus the Spirit of the Sun spoke unto Tulugak his servant!"

Then the old man seemed to pull himself together, and looked around dazedly, asking in his normal voice, "What has happened? Where have I been? I do not remember."

Mark held his breath, but to the Innuit this was the final proof. They jumped down off the iglerk and clustered around him excitedly, chattering, *"Annet'alo!* Behold, a miracle!" And they proceeded to tell Tulugak a dozen variations of his spirit voyage in great detail.

Mark pushed through them to the shaman, who was pulling on his clothes with stolid fatalism. When the handcuffs were snapped on his wrists he said calmly, "Wayanna." Mark motioned for him to sit on the floor, then clapped his hands and said loudly, *"Usivi'tok-ago-tivok.* Usivi'tok of the Police gives his consent. Tulugak shall be the new shaman. Let the council proceed."

The Eskimos clambered eagerly back onto the iglerk, and those hunters who had acted as guard for the sorcerer tried to find places on the platform also, their weapons lying forgotten on the floor.

Mark moved in front of the flickering lamp, raised a hand for attention, and began a long harangue, expounding the law in no uncertain terms. This was old stuff to him, and while his voice rolled sonorously through the familiar phrases part of his mind wandered some two thousand miles to the southward.

Mark was trying to picture the Inspector's face when he read his report—for it was going to contain a strong recommendation that a new course be added to the police-school curriculum. A course in black magic.

The Shooter's Corner

(*Continued from page 5*)

weapons that were used by the assassinators of our three murdered Presidents. After several days at the library digging into old and fragile volumes, and reading the same thing over and over, I finally gave up.

It is a strange commentary on early, and not so early reporting and court procedure, that the make and other details of these murder weapons (the most infamous in all history, as far as we are concerned) are not a matter of immediate available record. Or maybe I'm a lousy researcher!

Do you have authentic information on this subject?

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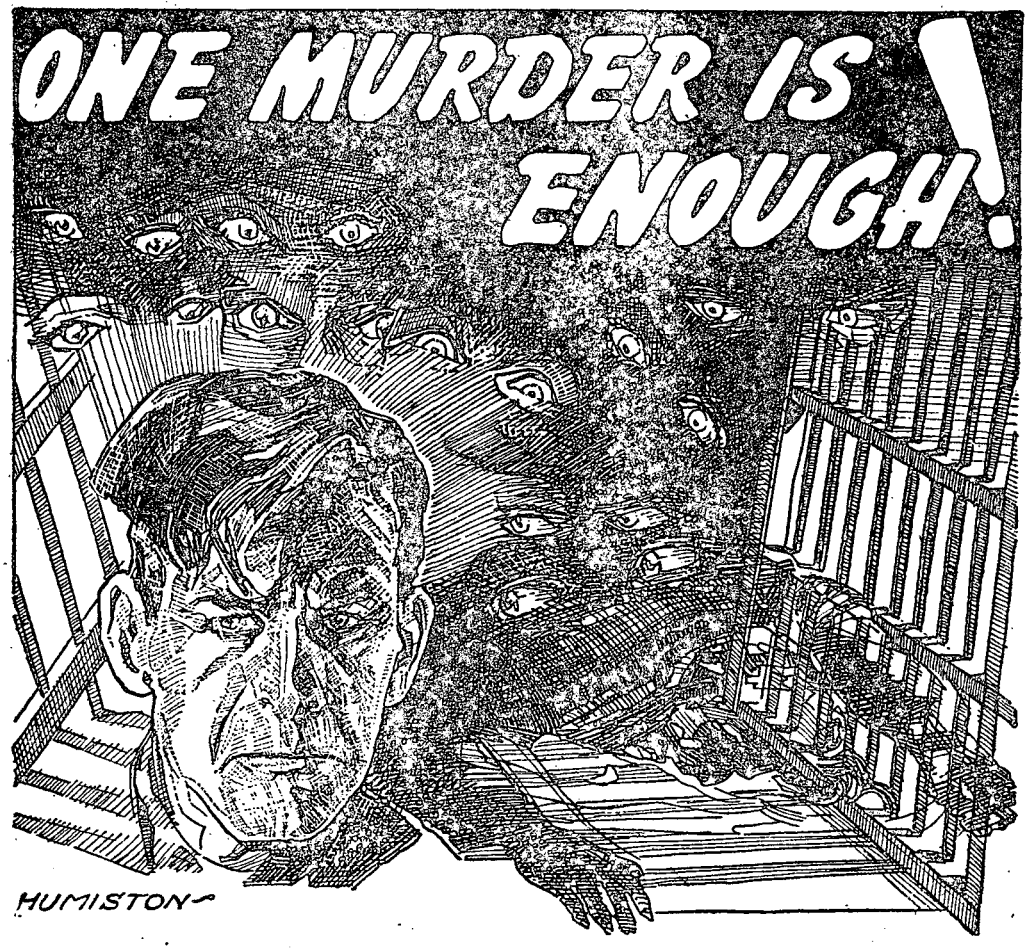
"Men Are Like Motors—Up to a Point. Then Their Minds Get Twisted Somehow, Give Me Motors Every Time,"



By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

THE old wooden rail in front of Simon Hyde had almost the familiar smoothness of polished steel. His thick hands tightened wearily on it.

He could sense the eyes of people on him, digging into his back, trying to look inside him. He had always been a little shy of people. He had felt more at home with motors.

And he had been right. For now people had condemned him ruthlessly.

But Simon Hyde was a fighter. He couldn't stand silent, like a guilty man.

"I didn't kill my partner," he said to the judge. He looked around at the courtroom and picked out plump Ralph Eggert in the row behind the lawyers. "But maybe I'll kill my other partner when I get out. He needs it."

Court attendants closed in on Hyde. He turned and walked with them through the small door in the wall opposite the judge's chambers. At least he had said something for himself.

In the courtroom Ralph Eggert's full face slowly went the color of slate. He sagged against the seat and slid to the floor.

Horace Wilmer, the Aldwych Weekly *Herald's* business manager, was the first to reach his friend Eggert. The half smile that had won him so many friends around town was gone from his face. He slid his powerful hands in under Ralph Eggert's

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armpits, lifted him and propped him up on the bench.

"It's over now, Ralph," Wilmer said quietly to Simon Hyde's partner. "We'll get you away from here at once."

He turned and summoned a scared youngster to him with a jerk of his head.

"Bill, go tell that parking lot man to drive my car to the courthouse steps," he said. "Say it's an emergency."

Bill Green glanced at the reporter for whom he was running copy to the telephone. This was the day the paper went to press.

The reporter glared at Horace Wilmer. But the *Herald's* business manager was firm-lipped, commanding. Reluctantly the reporter flipped a finger and Bill got going.

TO OPEN a way into Simon Hyde's small, ungainly house on the hill Horace Wilmer worked on an old-fashioned window catch.

The slanting light of the afternoon sun fell vividly on him but he did not hurry. There was not so much as an eavesdropping cow to lift her head from the rocky pasture land, still untouched by spring, that surrounded the place.

Wilmer did the job as calmly as he sold space in the Aldwych Weekly *Herald,* bought type metal or soothed an irritated subscriber. The faint smile remained fixed on his broad, ruddy face. He closed his pocketknife methodically and raised the sash.

"Come on, Ralph," he said. He lifted a leg over the windowsill and stepped into the house.

Ralph Eggert, frozen beside him, came suddenly to life. He scrambled in at Wilmer's heels in awkward panic. His flapping trouser cuff caught on the heel of his shoe and he sprawled on the floor of his partner's living room.

Horace Wilmer raised his eyebrows.

"Ease up, Ralph," he said. "That farmer won't wonder at seeing us on the Twinbrook Road. The *Herald* business manager's car is likely to be on any road in the township."

Eggert stood quaking in the center of the room, gloved hands shoved deep in his pockets. His brown suit hung on him as loosely as his gray skin hung on his heavy bones. Dark, feverish eyes were shrunken in their deep sockets.

"It's not just being seen near here," Eggert said. "If this thing were only over! I can't stand much more."

"You've stood six years," Horace Wilmer said reasonably. His smile widened slightly. "Probably stood them better than Simon Hyde has. And this will end it for you. Finish—and then great relief."

Wilmer's eyes were already appraising Simon Hyde's living room, a room to make a woman shudder. Three great leather chairs, one well worn, stood square against walls. A massive table, scratched by tools and burned by cigarette ends, with a powerful overhead light, blocked the big window. A bookcase was stacked with out of date automotive magazines and an old style roller top desk filled a corner. Above it hung a gaudy-colored photo of a scarlet racing car, hood open and tense men grouped around it.

Again Wilmer widened his smile. "Been here before? A bachelor's retreat—but not for what some bachelors retreat."

"I came here once with Simon," Eggert said. "That table was piled with handtools he was testing."

Terror burned stronger in his hollow eyes.

"Suppose, before he comes, somebody should happen—"

"What would it matter?" said Wilmer with unwearying patience. "Why shouldn't an old man and a new partner in the Hyde Automotive Company wish to greet the founder on the quiet after his release from the penitentiary?"

"On the quiet!" Eggert caught up the phrase. "That would explain why we hid the car. But—we—This must be done?"

"If you don't want him to kill you," Wilmer said. His voice was almost disinterested. He pulled binoculars from his topcoat pocket. Casually he turned them on the crossroad where the main highway swept through this unfertile stretch of New England countryside.

"Any sign of him?" Eggert asked at once.

"Bill Green couldn't get him here before five-thirty at the earliest. It's a long drive from the pen. Here, you keep watch."

He put the binoculars in Eggert's shaky

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hands. Slipping on a pair of gloves, he went to the desk. It was not locked. Simon Hyde's .38 revolver lay in a drawer under a few handtools and gauges.

Horace Wilmer nodded approvingly at the revolver.

"Just as described so graphically by his cleaning woman."

"Will people believe a clever mechanic like Simon Hyde would shoot himself while cleaning a gun?" Eggert asked apprehensively. He was having trouble keeping the glasses steady on the crossroads.

Horace Wilmer loaded the gun. His gloved fingers moved slowly but he made a neat job of it. He said:

"People will figure Simon was in a fury of impatience to get this gun set to kill you."

Eggert shuddered.

"Folks are outside in this," Wilmer reminded him. "They don't know who really slugged old Tom. They do know your testimony convicted Simon of manslaughter. And they also know his threat against you."

Eggert's eyes switched from the distant roads to Horace Wilmer. He dabbed his streaming forehead with a handkerchief.

Wilmer shook his head at him.

"If you'd made it a bit stronger and more convincing the verdict would have been murder. Then there'd have been no unfinished business to hang on for six years."

"If!" said Eggert wearily. "If wheat hadn't chosen to go down like a stone in the market that week! If old Tom hadn't suddenly become suspicious about one item in the books—"

"Taking a risk once is better than living in jail for years," Wilmer said. He sat down comfortably in one of the leather chairs. "Keep your eyes on that highway. While you're mooning about the 'ifs' remember that if I hadn't stepped in to save you—"

"Yes," Eggert said. "I would be in—there."

Horace Wilmer stood up and tapped his shoulder reassuringly. "And I wouldn't have been able to pick up Tom's share of Hyde Automotive from his stupid daughter."

Eggert's hollow face turned to his in obvious curiosity.

"A sure income gives a man a solid base to stand on while he reaches for the big stuff," Wilmer said. His voice was calm. "I'm young, yet, Eggert, and I'm just starting."

Eggert's face wrinkled intently. "Here he comes!" he exclaimed. "There's Bill Green's car!"

Wilmer thrust a hand into his pocket and pulled out a tube of metal. For the first time that afternoon his movements were rapid.

Eggert, lowering his glasses to steady his shaking hands, stared at it in surprise.

"Did Simon have a silencer here for his revolver?"

"No, Ralph," said Horace Wilmer. "No; he didn't. This is an idea of my own."

BILL GREEN had a bad time on his first public relations job. This Simon Hyde wasn't the silent, quick fingered mechanic who had quit working on a Cadillac timing gear to straighten the frame of the bicycle on which young Bill had once carried *Heralds* on his paper route.

White-haired and not half as big and square as Bill remembered, Hyde came thrusting through the prison gates as if making a jail break. You could almost believe the morose looking man *had* killed old Tom Slocum with a wrench. He walked away blindly.

Bill trailed along, telling him what he had rehearsed so carefully but quite sure Simon Hyde wasn't hearing a word of it.

Then, abruptly, Hyde stopped. "You say you've got a car?"

"Yes, Mr. Hyde. I've come to bring you back to Aldwych."

Hyde swung in the direction Bill's arm pointed.

"It's like this, Mr. Hyde," Bill said. "Your service station is still the top business in Aldwych. About the biggest single service station in New England. I don't think they do some jobs, like front end work, as well but it's going strong. Only of course a good many people are saying that if you come back they'll—if—"

"They won't do business with a killer," Hyde rasped. His laugh was harder than his talk. "That's what it is, boy?"

"This car here," Bill said. "Uh—that's almost what they're saying. Of course you being one of the town's richest citizens the

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Herald's had a few stories about your coming out and—well—you know how people are."

Hyde climbed into the old sedan and flung himself down on the seat. He motioned impatiently to Bill to get in.

"I don't know how people are—and I don't want to. People! I'll take motors. But I'm going back there right square on Locust Street—"

"Of course you can do that but why bat yourself on the head?" Bill burst out. "All that people know is—the testimony."

"Ralph Eggert's testimony," Hyde rasped. "How he saw me strike Tom Slocum. Start her up."

"You can't blame them altogether," Bill said, fumbling with his ignition key. "But if you want to get back where you were—working on the hard ones, installing the best equipment you can find, making it a place that dealers and shop men come to from all—"

"Get moving, boy!" Hyde snapped.

"You've got to humanize yourself to them," Bill said, hand on the key. It sounded phony but he pressed on. "I mean, the best thing is to give them time to get used to your being back. Don't go to the shop right away and let 'em see you're all ready to tell 'em to go—"

"What else, for Judas' sake!" Hyde exploded. "What else? Whine to 'em? Crawl? Ask to be forgiven for killing Tom when I know that slimy Ralph—"

"No!" Bill cried. "No whining! No crawling! That's where public relations comes in—where I come in."

"Start her, I said!"

Bill tramped on the starter. "I can fix it so you get back—but you can't if you figure on fighting the world."

Simon Hyde's head was on one side, listening. "Good Peter, what've you been doing to this motor, boy?" He sprang from the car, lifted the hood and bent over the engine, thick fingers busy.

"Give me a point file!" he commanded. "Your points—No file? How d'ye expect a motor to run with—A screwdriver, then!"

It took Bill ten minutes of argument to get him back in the car. And then he was half listening to Bill, half suffering with the motor as the car ran up and down the hills on the long road to Aldwych.

"If you'll just go to your place outside town for a few days—stay there, cut wood, fuss around—people will sort of get to wishing you'd come to town," Bill said. "That's psychology. Sure it would be their curiosity that made 'em want you at the shop on Locust Street, but they'd want you. It would be the first step back for you, instead of—"

"That's psychology, is it?" Simon Hyde said. He scowled into Bill's face. "Where'd you get this stuff, boy? Why'd you meet me? Are you a reporter?"

"Not now," said Bill sadly. "I got canned off the *Herald* a week ago. I'm not out for a story. I got to thinking that what you needed was a public relations counsellor, and knowing the Aldwych people pretty well—"

"You got to thinking!" Hyde was ironic. "You and who else, boy? Speak up!"

"Well, of course I talked things over with—"

"Who?"

"The *Herald's* business manager, Horace Wilmer," Bill said. "He wasn't the one who fired me; the editor did—"

"Wilmer, the man who took over Tom Slocum's share in my business with Ralph Eggert's backing?"

"That's right. Mr. Wilmer was trying to think of some way to get me back on the paper. He suggested that if I made good on a public relations job the editor might change his mind."

He went on, explaining to scowling Simon Hyde why Hyde must give people a chance to get used to him—he did not say, to get sorry for him.

"A man's a plain fool to kick around a motor like you're doing," Hyde said.

"A plain fool or a busted one," Bill said. "Prices are running high at your service station these days."

"A motor rates decent care!" Hyde snapped. "And I'm to rely on your wisdom, am I?"

Bill blushed.

"Nobody can know men," Simon Hyde said. "Up to a point they're like motors. But beyond that, boy, they have minds that twist 'em—"

He threw up his hands and was silent. Bill said:

"After you've been back a few days, at

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your house, not in town, we'll work up a simple, dignified statement to the—"

Simon Hyde snarled. "People can gossip themselves black in the face. No statements!"

BILL drove on. Ten minutes later Hyde jerked a thick hand in a grudging gesture.

"I'll go stay at my house for a while," he said. "The cleaning woman's stocked the kitchen for me. Maybe I'll stay overnight; maybe longer."

He drew a deep breath. "I've got to think," he said, looking out at the prim New England beginnings of spring, swamp cabbage showing by a brook, small willow branches yellowing, grass turning reluctantly from gray to green. "A man can think—outside."

He went silent. He said nothing at all about a need for a public relations counsellor. He just looked around.

Bill avoided Aldwych on the way to Twinbrook road. With great relief he put his old motor in second for the job of twisting and climbing up to Hyde's square house on the hill.

Bouncing over the last of the winter's crop of frost heaved stones Bill brought the sedan to a halt in front of the garage dug out under Hyde's living room.

"I'll go to town and get you some food, and tomorrow—" he began as Simon Hyde got out of the car.

"Drop him off in front of the place and get away at once," Horace Wilmer had advised. *"He might change his mind."*

"Wait!" said Simon Hyde. His voice was imperative. "Cut her!"

He pulled a bunch of keys out of his pocket and stood there at the door of his padlocked garage, feeling them. He took his time, running fingers over each key.

Now he had the keys; other men no longer used keys to lock him up. Bill felt a twinge of sympathy. He switched off the motor.

Simon Hyde swung open the garage door. It sagged and a rusted upper hinge abruptly broke away from the wood. He shoved the door open and propped it up. Next moment he was in the garage, opening steel tool boxes.

He came out again, his thick hands full. He opened the hood of the car. With not so much as a word in answer to Bill's objections he took the cap off the distributor and went to work.

Bill fidgetted and swung his arms as the cold wind of evening worked on him. Oblivious of temperature, Hyde filed and adjusted the breaker points with tender care, took out the plugs, cleaned them and narrowed the gap.

"That'll do till I get it in the shop," Hyde said twenty minutes later. He scowled at Bill. "No public relations. But bring it in and I'll do an overhaul to pay for the lift."

"Thanks, Mr. Hyde," Bill said. "I always figured you were regular."

"Regular!" Simon Hyde clamped down the hood and stood back from the car with a queer look. "What's regular about any man?"

BILL GREEN drove cautiously down among the sliding stones. He lifted his speed at the bottom of the hill and pointed her toward town.

Above the noise of the motor rose a sharp crack and then, before he could brake, another. Gun fire!

He stared up the bare rocky hill. As the wheels groaned to a stop he leaned out the car door for a better look.

Simon Hyde stood at an opened window of his house with a revolver in his hand. It was raised to the sky to fire another shot. When he saw Bill open the car door he beckoned urgently, again and again. Desperation was signalled by every wave of his arm.

Bill twisted his wheel and turned the car gingerly on the narrow road. He took the hill at a reckless pace, dropping into low to keep the car surging upward, and sprang out.

"Come up here!" Hyde called, stabbing a hand at the path climbing from garage level to the front door. "Run!"

Hyde stood back from the front door, revolver still in his hand. Bill froze on the threshold.

In the room a man, shrunken inside his clothes, sprawled dead on the floor. He had been shot through the back of the head. Ralph Eggert! And the blood looked fresh —horribly fresh!

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"Have you got a watch, boy?" Simon Hyde asked, clutching at Bill's sleeve. "Sure, you've got a watch! Look at it!"

Mechanically Bill pulled out his watch. Five past six.

"How long since you left me here?" Simon Hyde demanded. "Speak up, boy! How long?"

"Five—ten minutes," Bill muttered, eyes held by what was left of Eggert.

"Remember that!" Simon Hyde said. "Five-fifty five's the earliest you could have left me. I'm not trapped yet."

He walked into the room and turned Eggert's body onto its back. "Take his feet!" he said. "Hurry, boy!"

"He—he's dead!" Bill objected. His teeth were chattering. "You—mustn't touch him! Call—call the police!"

"That's what I did last time," Hyde said harshly. "Take the revolver, then!"

He tossed it and, automatically, Bill caught it. At once he dropped it.

"I'm not trapping you," Hyde said. "It's my revolver. My fingerprints are all over it. Bring it or let it lie."

"You're crazy!" Bill burst out. "We've got to—"

With a surge of strength Simon Hyde lifted the body of Eggert onto his shoulders. Bent under it, he shuffled to the door.

"Come on," he called. "You'll drive. Hurry!"

Impulsively Bill picked up the revolver. He trailed to the car and opened the rear door.

Hyde dumped his burden on the seat and flung himself in after it.

"Drive, boy!" he cried.

Bill slid in behind the wheel. "Where?" he said at the bottom of the hill.

"Doc Blandy still medical examiner? Drive there! Step on it, boy!"

Bill drove. Short miles to town dragged by.

IN THIS nightmare Bill followed at Simon Hyde's heels, just behind Hyde's dreadful burden. They walked through Doc Blandy's half-filled waiting room, breeding quick hysteria there. In the consulting room Hyde lowered the body onto the couch and faced the old doctor.

"How long's this man been dead, doc?" he asked. "Quick, man, how long? In a cold room. You have my life in your hands. Boy, look at your watch again!"

A patient with a half-bandaged arm hastened out of the room unheeded. Doc Blandy stood still, meditative, it seemed. After one quick glance at Eggert's face his keen eyes did not leave Hyde's. Hyde motioned with that desperate urgency of his.

Suddenly the old doctor twitched his nose to one side and sniffed. He crossed to a white metal cabinet and picked up a thermometer. He knelt beside the couch.

"A man's a motor—up to a point," Simon Hyde muttered. "That's what I count on—the time it takes a man or motor to cool off after the switch is cut. He'd been dead a while before I entered that room."

He turned anxiously to Bill Green. "Check your watch, boy. Write down the times. Write 'em down so you don't forget."

Minutes later Doc Blandy looked up.

"On temperature alone," he said, "from half an hour to an hour, absolute limits. Now we'll call—"

"It's twenty-one past six," Bill said. He showed his watch dial to the doctor. "I didn't leave Simon Hyde till five fifty-five, anyhow, maybe as late as six o'clock. He was tuning up my—"

Simon Hyde clutched at his shoulder. "Four minutes!" he said. "Is that enough to keep me out of the chair? Make more tests, doc. Narrow it down or you'll lose a patient to the chair. Come on, boy!" He stopped. "The chair! Better than that cell, anyhow."

"Wait!" called Doc Blandy. "Wait, I tell you!"

But Simon Hyde was already pushing Bill out the door. Glancing back, Bill saw the doctor reaching for his telephone.

Under Hyde's urging Bill sent his car whizzing down Elm Street in the cold dusk and turned left at the town hall. He stopped with sliding wheels and shrieking brakes before the side basement entrance where the single green light already glowed.

Simon Hyde leaped out of the car. He halted on the step leading into police headquarters so abruptly that Bill ran into him.

"If I didn't, somebody else did," Hyde said.

His eyes swept past Bill. In the mo-

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ment before Hyde spoke again Bill could see the stiff mechanical motion of the arm of Tim Dix's linotype in the blue-lit *Herald* composing room across narrow Pond Street.

"You wait here, boy," Hyde said. "I'll get the chief. Wait here!"

He threw his weight against the door. Bill caught a glimpse of Chief Higgins' portly body just inside, heading out in a hurry. Doc Blandy had wasted no time. Hyde pushed in through the door, talking already, and swung it shut.

Bill Green wavered on the steps, glancing again across the narrow side street toward the lighted windows of the *Herald* offices. A head in silhouette vanished from sight. Tomorrow was press day; Tim Dix wasn't alone in the building. But if Hyde and Chief Higgins came out while he was over there writing the story—

"I'll stand by and see it through," Bill told himself. "I'm far enough ahead on this story so they'll have to hire me back."

He shoved his hands into his coat pockets and felt the cold steel of Hyde's revolver.

The back door of the *Herald* offices opened and Horace Wilmer walked quickly across the street. His movements were precise.

"What's this, Bill?" Wilmer asked. "Who just went into headquarters?"

Bill flicked a hand toward the *Herald* editorial window.

"Our editor will take me back—or else," he said. "I can't figure why he fired me."

He looked around. Though lighted cars were hurrying up and down the slant of Elm Street past the front of the town hall, Pond Street here was quite empty and graying into night. He pulled Simon Hyde's revolver out of his pocket.

"The gun that just killed Ralph Eggert," he said. "It's more than a murder story—it's a mystery. Hyde didn't do it."

Horace Wilmer listened to Bill in tense silence.

"You've got the answer in your hand, Bill," Wilmer said at the end. "Before Hyde started working on your car he went into the garage. There's a stair at the back of it to the room above."

Bill shook his head but Wilmer hurried on: "It would take only an instant or two to kill when Hyde found Eggert up there. As for the noise, if Hyde had a silencer on the revolver—"

"He wasn't out of my sight fifteen seconds," Bill said positively. "He's the only man in town who couldn't have murdered—"

"But Bill, you can be wrong about a few seconds. The chief may even find a silencer out there—"

"No!"

"Let's see that revolver, Bill," Wilmer said suddenly. His hands slid down to the weapon and closed on it. "You're handling it carelessly; you'd better—"

With sudden obstinacy Bill resisted Wilmer's insistent hands. The *Herald* hadn't hired him back yet and this was the murder weapon.

Wilmer's knee lifted and drove hard into the pit of his stomach. Quick agony paralyzed him; he bent double. The revolver was wrenched from his weak fingers.

"You were playing with the gun, Bill," Wilmer whispered. His voice was horrible. The cold gun muzzle poked down at Bill's wet face.

The swing door of headquarters rumbled under a mighty shove. It knocked Wilmer sideways. The revolver roared and lead bit the granite step. A flurry of violent action raged above Bill's contorted body. Men bumped and swayed.

"You're nuts, Wilmer," Chief Higgins' rough voice cried. "Tryin' to kill Bill Green!"

"Take your hands off me, you slob!" Wilmer snarled.

"I didn't figure he'd be out to murder you, boy!" Simon Hyde said, wrapping an arm around Bill Green to support him. "But it had to be Wilmer. His name kept coming up in my affairs without open reason."

Chief Higgins was panting. "Stand still or I'll rap you, Wilmer! What the—"

"His trouble will be gunpowder imbedded in the skin of his hand," Hyde said. "You learn about things like that in the pen. Hang onto him, chief. You've got a killer there."

"Gi' me a hand!" Higgins gasped. "Powder, huh! The paraffin test will show it."

Reviving, Bill watched the chief and Hyde

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hustle Wilmer into headquarters. Wilmer's face was cold as snow now. He had quit struggling.

"Yeah," growled the chief, inside the door. "By Peter, we'll run a test on you, Wilmer. Doc Blandy don't guess on time of death and Bill Green don't lie."

"I haven't seen Eggert today!" Wilmer snapped. "And why should I kill him?"

"You didn't knee that kid an' then stick a gun to his head for exercise," Higgins said stubbornly. "Say, maybe we can dig up somebody who saw you drivin' Eggert out there!"

"I was mistaken," cried Wilmer, suddenly. "It was today I gave Eggert a lift toward Twinbrook road."

The chief nodded his head at Wilmer. "Sometimes a guy is so sure the rest of the world is stupid he gets careless. You wouldn't ha' run wild here without some reason. Stand still, you!"

Simon Hyde spoke suddenly:

"Somebody killed Tom Slocum, too. I didn't. I never could figure Eggert had the guts. I was going to make him talk about it somehow."

He stared at Horace Wilmer. "Maybe Wilmer knew I could make Eggert talk. Now Eggert's dead. He won't talk and I'm framed to die, too. That would leave Wilmer head of a business bringing in—"

"Prove I killed Slocum!" Horace Wilmer flared.

"What's this—a silencer?" Higgins said, pulling his hand out of Wilmer's pocket. He sniffed at the bit of steel. "Like I said, you're too conceited, Wilmer. I won't have to prove the other murder. This one will do fine. One murder's enough."

Simon Hyde laid a shaking hand on Bill's shoulder.

"You'll handle the people, son," he said. "I'll handle the motors. I—I go for motors, myself."

Bill lifted his head. "I see what you mean," he said. "Tuning up mine this afternoon will keep you out of the chair."

THE THIRD MATE was up against it. . . . First when the old freighter struck, then on the Florida beach with the full fury of the storm striking a group of desperate men intent on loot, salvage—and murder, if need be.

All in the next issue of

A HURRICANE CAN BREED MURDER

Richard Howells Watkins

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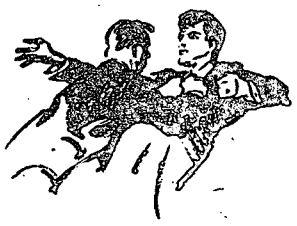
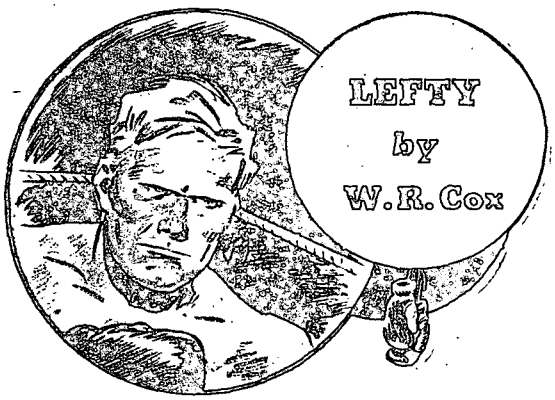


AN ITINERANT photographer seemed an unlikely subject to be shot at, blasted at, sniped at on the very edge of the Indian Reservation. But anyway, it aroused his curiosity!

"Inspected and Condemned"

by E. HOFFMANN PRICE



LEFTY by W. R. Cox

"GETTIN' to the top George's way — the right way."

SHORT STORIES

A RAILROAD dick waits till all the facts are in—and Mohawk Daniels had a grim way of collecting facts on his particular division.

"RED OVER YELLOW"

William L. Rohde

And other favorites—plus The Shooter's Corner

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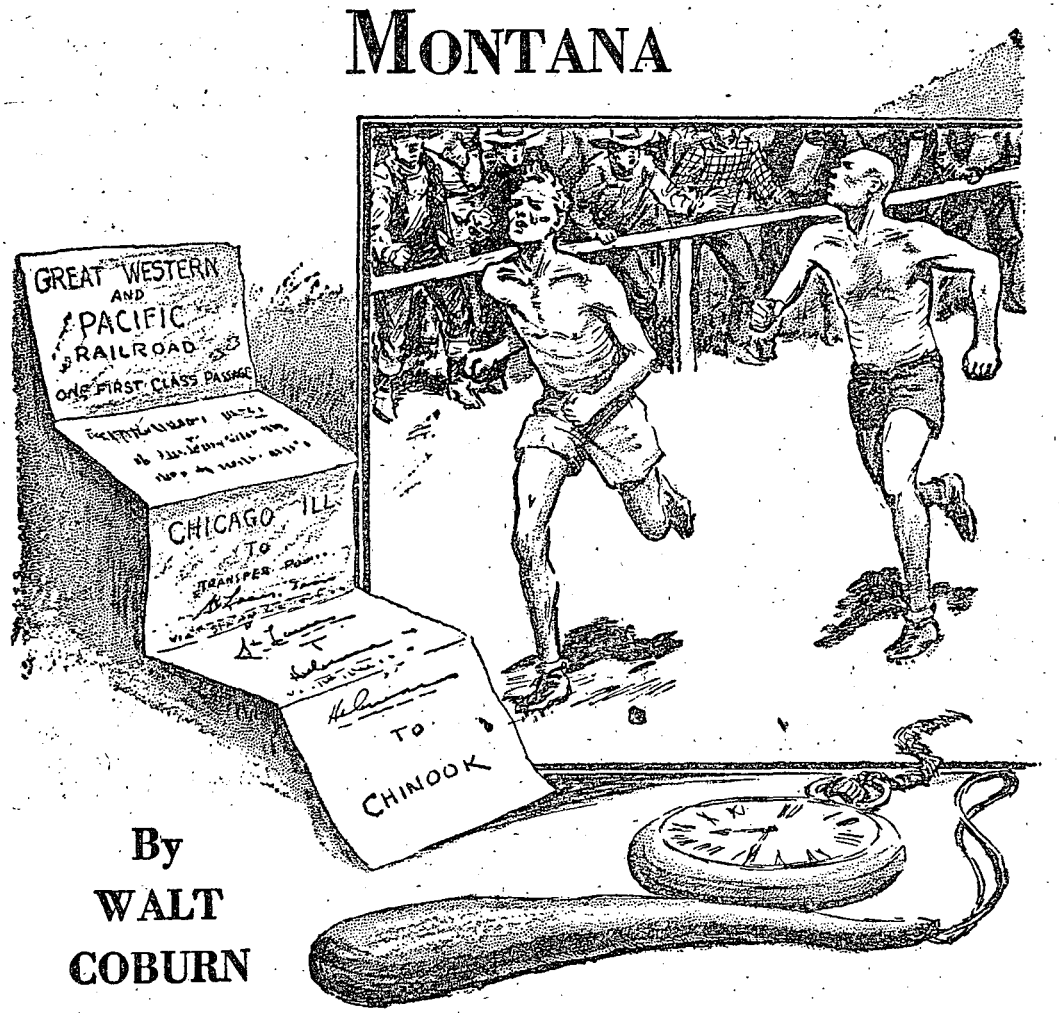
A Ticket To Chinook, Montana



By WALT COBURN

I

"LET no man-made laws," John Slade, convict, scratched on his cell wall at Sing Sing prison, "nor any Commandment of God, stand between a man and his goal in life."

Ironically scratched there by the hand of a man dying of prison plague, who hemorraghed his life's blood on the night the words were written.

Those written words were passed along by prison grapevine to John Slade's son in reform school, who chalked them on a school room blackboard on the night he "went over the hill." Thus wrote Willard Slade, son of John Slade:

"Let no man-made laws, nor any Commandment of God, stand between a man and his goal in life!"

Willard Slade had ambitions. And those ambitions were unhampered by scruples. Willard Slade had no scruples whatever. Part of his peculiar makeup might have been hereditary, in view of the fact that his father had been a maker of counterfeit bank notes and a notorious forger until he was caught and convicted and died in Sing Sing prison.

Willard Slade inherited his father's crafty, cunning brain, along with his lean,

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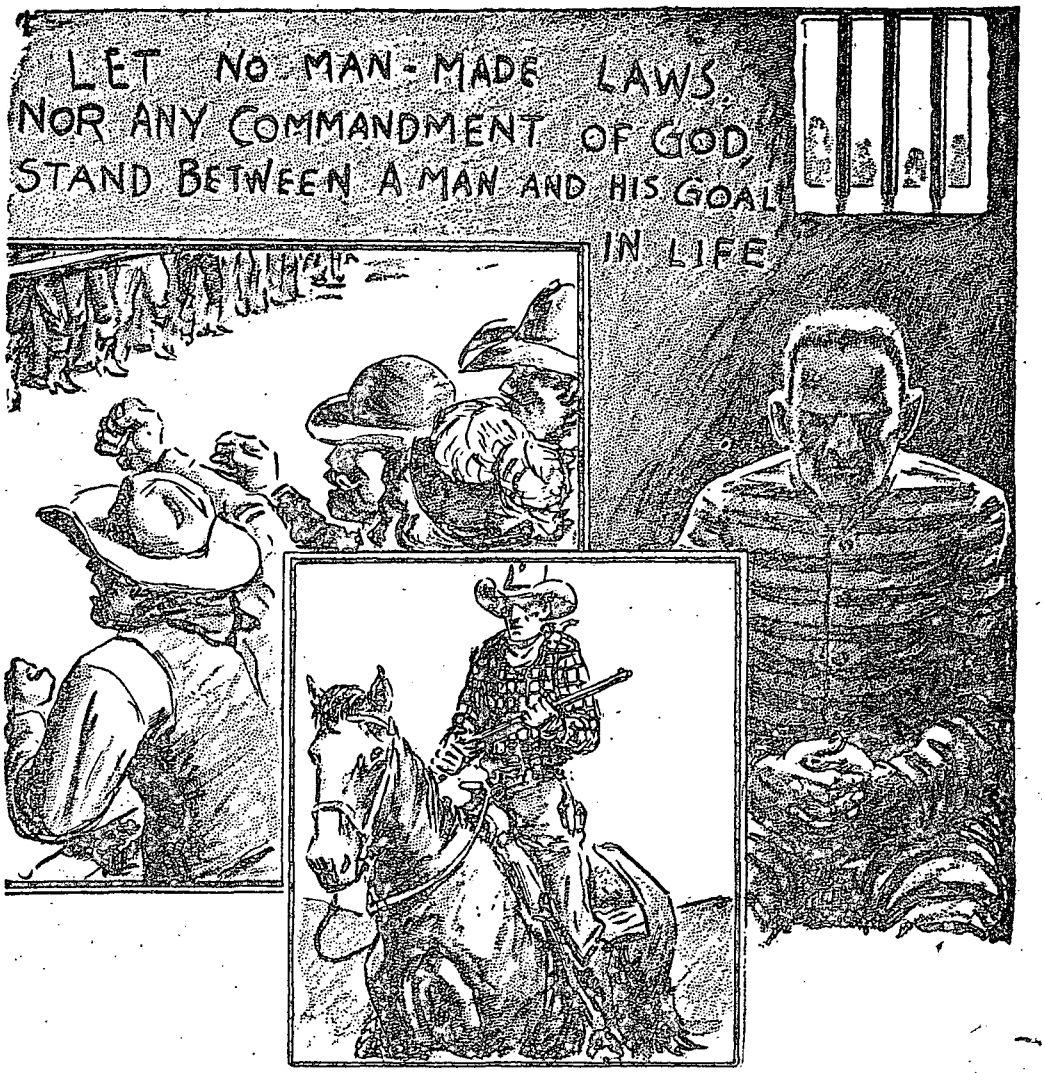

spare build. At the reform school where he received his education, Slim Willie was at least four school grades ahead of the boys his age and came to look down on them as dullards. He read everything he could beg, borrow and sometimes steal. Even then he was something of a foot racer. He matched his lean speed against the burly build of the reform school bully and bested him time after time, matching cunning and speed against slower wits and strength. Slim Willie became the brains and thereby the leader, with a small but select following of incorrigible youth. When his gang was caught guilty-handed at any of the petty larceny thefts, Slim Willie glibly lied out of it and his lies were backed by proof that would stand up. While the finger of guilt was pointed at one of his gang, the boy found guilty never dared squeal for fear of gang punishment. When Willard Slade got ready to go over the hill, he went. Taking with him quite a sum of money from the reform school safe in the Superintendant's office. Working the combination of the safe had been easy pickings. Any attempt to hunt down Slim Willie was a lukewarm chase that soon grew cold. The reform school was more than willing, even eager, to let Slim Willie escape.

Willard Slade could pass the entrance examinations that might admit him to college, but that reform school background he had for a grade school and high school education was a bar-sinister. He had no

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written diploma. Only brains and stolen money, so Willard Slade had to decide against a college education where he would have led, hands down in scholarship, and would have won his college Letter on the track and probably have been captain of the track team. Reluctantly, bitterly, Willard Slade discarded a University education. And that bitterness ate deep as an acid poison into his heart and brain.

WILLARD SLADE had never worn any clothes except those handed him by charity during his reform school years. He rode the blind baggage into Chicago dressed in his dirty reform school clothing. Then he bought a whole new outfit. Scrubbed to the hide and barbered, he dressed in his new clothes. His selection had been a trifle gaudy. Dressed to the nines, he had lost no time enrolling in the best business college in Chicago. And he hoarded his money like a miser. Paying his way and his room and board bills, with what he won gambling. He could deal from a cold deck of marked cards or roll a pair of loaded dice with any tinhorn gambler—when he was not burning the midnight oil in study. He learned a smattering of law and banking, and took a course in civil engineering and draughtsmanship, and as many other business college courses as he could cram into a few years.

He was bothered by a cough and lung ailment which grew insidiously. On the day he finished his business college courses, he lay on his bed, racked by the coughing, and there was a blood stain on his pillow.

No need to waste money on a doctor. It was time to quit the city of Chicago and go west where the air was clean and could heal the diseased lungs. He seldom drank but he had half a pint of whiskey in his room and he downed a part of it, then dressed and went out, heading for the stockyards district. He was back before dawn. In his wallet was a ticket to Montana. He had blackjacked and rolled some cowhand who had come to Chicago with a trainload of cattle and had his return ticket in his pocket. Willard Slade caught the next westbound train out of Chicago; the ticket he handed the conductor was marked Chinook, Montana.

Willard Slade got a bookkeeping job with the big Three Links cattle outfit. Bookkeeper and storekeeper at the home ranch's commissary, he had plenty of leisure time during the day. He learned to ride a gentle horse and he got a claw-hammer and a bag of staples and rode fence most of the day and did his bookkeeping and store chores at night. In a year he was rid of the hacking cough and his skin was weathered a healthy color. And during that year Willard Slade learned more about the cattle business than the Chicago stockholders in the Three Links Continental Cattle Company, whose books he had been keeping.

In his log cabin back of the ranch office he had a map showing all the land within the far-flung boundaries that the Continental claimed for their range holdings. Patented land. Leased land. And the exact location of those little ranches the outfit had built for line camps. Log cabins and cattle sheds and corrals and fenced-in hay meadows. Line camps located on springs or creeks. And to some of those winter line camps there was no legal title, built up as they had been through the years from pioneer days before the Government of state land surveys. Slade kept his own private set of books, and he kept the map and the books padlocked in a saratoga trunk.

Now and then he would sit into one of the bunkhouse poker games, letting himself get coaxed into the game.

"Set in, Slim Willie. Hell, you're makin' double our cowhand's forty a month. It won't hurt you to donate to the fund fer ol' broke down cowboys!" And Slim Willie sat in.

Never winning too much from any one man, losing a little to any rider who looked like he might turn out to be a bad loser. Leaving the game a little the winner. In the end he managed to double his wages at the end of the month—and no hard feelings. He was cunning, subtle.

DAVE STUART, who ramrodded the Three Links outfit, would have been surprised to learn that the pilgrim bookkeeper, Slim Willie, was doubling his wages at poker every month. Or that he knew anything about the cattle business except what was on his dude books.

For according to Dave Stuart, a man had to be an actual working cowboy and a

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top cowhand at that, like he was, and able to run his round up wagon, handle beef, rope and brand and grade cattle and all the countless details of a ramrod's job, before that man could actually qualify as a cowman.

What Willard Slade had in mind before the end of the year, was to work himself into the big salaried position of general manager, with Dave Stuart taking his ramrod orders from this same Slim Willie. Willard Slade was biding his time and playing his cards close to his belly and he could well afford to wait a year or two before he made a trip to Chicago and walked in on the board meeting of the stockholders of the Continental Cattle Company. He would have it all down in black and white in figures that actually counted. To absolutely convince the owners that they needed a shrewd business man like Willard Slade to be general manager of the Continental Cattle Company.

He would point out how Dave Stuart might be the best top working cowhand in the Montana cow country, but the man had never gotten beyond the sixth grade in school. He was ignorant. So ignorant in his cowhand way that he believed himself smart. Through that ignorance, wasteful. The expense of running the outfit as Dave Stuart had run it, could be cut in half. Dave Stuart was overlooking chances to expand in places where it was advisable and he was too ignorant to drop and toss into the discard other things that were deadwood and ran into thousands of dollars. When the time came, Willard Slade would walk in on that stockholders meeting and lay the cards on the line. He'd be neatly dressed in a tailored suit and a white shirt and polka dot tie and he would have on a pair of shopmade black boots and the boots shined. And a new Stetson hat, just to show them he belonged on the ranch. Just that subtle touch to his city clothes. His papers in a leather brief case. And with his skin weathered by summer sun and last winter's frost bite fading black scars, he would command respect. He would have his wavy sandy blond hair trimmed. He considered himself handsome in a lean jawed, hawkbeaked way. His mouth was thin lipped and tight at the corners and he had a pair of slate gray eyes that were shrewd and calculating and without any mercy to soften them.

SUCH were the carefully laid calculating plans of Willard Slade. And so much for the plans of mice and men. And if Willard Slade had been content with that plan to become general manager of the Continental Cattle Company and if he had played it on the level, he might have gone to Dave Stuart and put the proposition to the big ramrod and got his consent and even his sincere assistance.

Because Dave Stuart knew his limitations. His handicap in the way of education. That's why he had had to hire a bookkeeper. There was a lot of the actual business end requiring what Dave Stuart called book learnin' that he would have been happy to hand over to Willard Slade. Even as general manager Dave Stuart was big enough to step down and hand the reins over to a better man. Together they might have made a workable team.

But Willard Slade hated the guts of Dave Stuart. He hated the big ramrod on sight, even when Dave had hired him at Chinook.

Dave Stuart was a big husky six-footer. Healthy and active. With a blunt nose and jaw and a wide mouth that grinned easily. He had wiry black hair and puckered blue gray eyes. He was easy going and good natured. Quiet spoken, there was no swagger or show off in his nature. Just solid and dependable. Honest in his deals; when Dave Stuart gave a man his word for anything, he kept that word. And he stayed sober. A few drinks in town just to make him feel good. Or a nip on a cold winter morning if somebody had a bottle. Never quarrelsome. But when he was crowded into a fight, all hell could not stop him.

Dave Stuart was everything Willard Slade wanted to be, and was not. Dave Stuart was, as the cow country termed it, "much man". Therefore, Willard Slade hated Dave Stuart's guts.

Willard Slade saddled a gentle horse and took his claw hammer and bag of staples and a lunch wrapped in his saddle slicker and started out, riding the big horse pasture. He took along a .22 Winchester and a couple of boxes of cartridges. He had practiced until he was a better

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than average shot, and could shoot the head off a prairie chicken. Prairie chickens were plentiful and like as not he would ride back at sundown with a mess. And as he rode away from the ranch one particular morning he had his dreams of one day managing all this big cow outfit at a handsome salary. Furthermore, he'd get a wedge in on some of the stock and become a stockholder, from then on he was giving himself ten years until he owned the outfit.

WILLARD SLADE was at the far end of the horse pasture and ten miles from the home ranch when he rode up on the survey party. They were camped on Sage Creek. It was a big survey party and he rode up just as they were eating noon dinner. He made himself known and ate dinner and smoked and talked to the chief of the party. And when the crew left with their transit and two Chinamen and a stake man, the chief of the party went into the empty army tent together with a couple of draughtsmen, and Willard Slade went along.

"It's a State survey. Following the U. S. Government survey. We finally got enough State funds appropriated to go ahead. It will be a complete survey. Take a look at this map. If you can read a map, you'll discover some surprises. Big outfits each claiming an empire, a small kingdom. Between you and me, I'm giving those big land grabbing cow outfits no longer than a year. Then the day of the Cattle Baron will be gone. When this survey is completed next fall, all this land will be open for homesteading. The Agricultural Department has already got out a lot of literature on dry land farming. It's free literature and will be broadcast by mailing list to all the middlewest farmers. Then come next spring when the snow is gone and the frost gets out of the ground, mark my word, Slade, and I'm no prophet, but this I'll gamble on, there will be one hell of a big invasion by homesteaders who have read that free U. S. Government literature on dry land farming. Every big cattle outfit will be lousy with homesteaders and the Cattle Barons, who think they're each and every one of 'em a ruler by the Divine Right of Kings, will find themselves hamstrung. Hamstrung!"

This civil engineer from the State Land Office seemed bitter as gall against the cattlemen. Willard Slade nodded sympathy and he had already ingratiated himself into the man's confidence by saying he was a tenderfoot and a pilgrim. He told a few instances of the practical cowboy jokes that made him the butt for their ignorant laughter. He had sensed the surveyor's antagonistic attitude right from the start when he rode up to their camp and said he was riding fence for the Three Links. Slim Willie knew all the tricks and the smooth glib talk to get himself on friendly terms with the chief of the survey party. He had put the question slyly, slipping it insidiously into the conversation.

"I hate their damned guts, Slade, and that's the truth. Those high and mighty cattle kings. Throwing gold pieces in the air at the Cattlemen's Convention at Helena for the bellhops to scramble over in the lobby. I was a greenhorn then, rubbing my last two dollars together. No job. It took all the guts I had not to fight and scramble for those gold coins tossed in the air. Empty bellied, I was shoved aside by the drunken cowmen and out into the street.

"At Chinook where I was starving to death, I was damnfool enough to run for County Surveyor. I didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell. The survey job went to a local man who didn't need the money because he owns a saloon on the side. I'm working now under that same man. Doing his work. And that damned Three Links outfit —

"I was on a hunting trip after blacktail, in the badlands, with a few friends, and on a part of the Three Links range. One of the boys shot a horse by accident. The Three Links roundup was working the badlands gathering beef. That big Dave Stuart and a couple of his cowboys heard the shots and rode up on us. They took our rifles and smashed 'em and made us break camp and kicked us off and we didn't dare stop till we reached Chinook. Perhaps you're a friend of big Dave Stuart?"

"I hate his damned guts," said Willard Slade.

They shook on that. And the chief of the survey party motioned him outside and over to his sleeping bag and he dug up a bot-

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tle. Slim Willie made a pretense at taking drink for drink as they sat on their hunkers.

"I'll show you something, Slade."

THE chief of the survey party's name was Mack Burkey. He told Willard Slade to call him Mack. Willard Slade said to call him Slim Willie after the third drink. Then Mack Burkey dug into his sleeping bag and drew from it a blue-print map. When he unrolled it and placed a rock at each corner, it showed in detail all the land claimed within the vast boundaries of the Continental Cattle Company.

"Take a look a this map. I spent a lot of time on it." His pencil pointed at each of the ten places on the map marked in red ink.

"Here's the Grouse Coulee line camp. Cabin, barn, sheds, fenced hay land, a horse pasture. The big Grouse Coulee Springs. And no title to that land. That's one ranch wide open for homestead.

"The North Fork line camp. Wide open for the man that grabs it. Improvements, even the last year's haystacks. That's another.

"No clear title to the Indian Springs line camp. Open—

"The Alkali Flat was taken up for a desert claim by one of the Three Links cowboys and he was killed by a bronc a month later. The Three Links went ahead with their improvements and sunk an artesian well and the water geysered up to fill what's called Alkali Lake. Two hundred acres in alfalfa. Contest that title and it's yours."

Mack Burkey was a long legged raw-boned six-footer with pale red hair. He had a long pointed lower jaw and a sharp thin nose and a sunburnt skin. A pair of small mean pale blue eyes. A Missourian. He had an engineering degree from some remote college but he knew surveying. There was a twist to his lips as if he always had a bitter taste in his mouth.

When Mack Burkey had pointed out the ten line camps, he removed the rocks and carefully rolled the blue print and put it back in his sleeping bag. They had another drink from Mack Burkey's bottle. His long forefinger tapped Willard Slade on his skinny chest where the over sized flannel shirt hung loosely. He spoke with a nasal twang.

"If you want to string along with me, we'll clean up, Slim Willie. You have cunning and you hate Dave Stuart's guts like I hate 'em. This official survey goes on file this September, and the homesteader invasion won't be until late Spring. Then is our chance. You pick out your ranch, I'll pick mine. Between us we will hand pick each man that we put on each of those line camps to file a homestead claim. With winter coming on, the Continental Cattle Company will be forced to buy us out, at our own figure. The Three Links must have those line camps and the hay that will be in the stacks, to winter their cattle. We got the Continental Cattle Company by the short hairs. Right over the big barrel. Hamstrung. They'll be forced to buy our homestead relinquishments, at our price. Have you got the brains and the guts to go into partnership with me on this deal?"

Mack Burkey's pale blue eyes, a little bloodshot from booze, stared into the slate gray eyes of Willard Slade. They understood one another as if they read each other's mind and the way that cunning brain worked. Willard Slade had never hoped to find such a partner out here in the West. They were both men nursed on meanness and conniving and cunning and treachery. Cold blooded as a pair of snakes. There was no feeling of warmth for each other. They were incapable of friendship.

"It's a deal, Mack."

They drank on it. Only a small swallow went down Slim Willie's throat but Mack Burkey tipped the bottle and let the last of the raw whiskey go down his gullet. Then smashed the empty bottle on the wagon wheel.

ON HIS way back to the home ranch, Willard Slade was thoughtful. He had no wish to form a partnership with any man. But Mack Burkey had just the attributes he needed. Even when Slim Willie had looked at the map, he knew what he had to do. He had listened patiently enough to what was his own idea as it was told by the surveyor. Slim Willie was far, far ahead of the man while he talked. In fact he was so far ahead of this partnership in con-

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nivery that he had gone on to its completion, all the money paid cash in hand and the business terminated. Further even than that, Slim Willie had figured out his plan for the severing of the treacherous partnership. To Mack Burkey dead in his coffin. And his share of the money in the pockets of Willard Slade.

Mack Burkey's a boozer, Willard Slade had it figured out. All the earmarks of a heavy drinker and a man who drank alone in his unfriendly bitter world. A secret drinker. When the money had been laid on the line and divided, then Mack Burkey would reach for his hidden bottle. He would tip that bottle up and let the raw whisky go down his gullet without tasting it. And never a taste of the deadly poison that would be in the whisky bottle until it cramped into his stomach. He would writhe for a short while in mortal agony and then stiffen in rigid death. And there would be no proof against Slim Willie to accuse him of his partner's murder.

"It's a deal, Mack."

Willard Slade grinned to himself as he rode on to the home ranch. But it was more than a deal. Slim Willie held the deck and the cards were marked.

He forgot all about getting a mess of prairie chicken with his .22 target rifle. He let his gentle horse pick its own lazy gait. It was after dark when he reached the home ranch.

II

AS WILLARD SLADE rode up in the dark and past the shadowy log buildings that were scattered haphazard to give the home ranch the appearance of a little village, he smelled smoke.

Not the smoke that came from the stove pipe at the cook cabin. Nor was it the clean tangy wood smoke of an open fire.

This was the sort of smoke that comes from a building afire and drowned out by water. There had been a fire here. And when he reached the place where his private little log cabin had been, behind the office and store building, Willard Slade stiffened in his saddle and his belly and guts went cold. He pulled up and stared, wide eyed, slack jawed.

Where his little log cabin had stood there was only a pile of sodden ashes and charred timbers. The weathered logs had burned like tinder and the sod roof, rank with high weeds, had caved in. And that was all there was left of the cabin.

Everything Willard Slade owned in the world had been in that cabin. All his clothes neatly hung, coats, vests, pants, on hangers in the little closet. Tooth brush and shaving outfit and his comb and brush laid out on the wash stand. All his hoarded money, together with what he owned, in a metal box on the top tray of the saratoga trunk. The detailed map, just as accurate in detail as the surveyor Mack Burkey's map, neatly rolled. A duplicate set of the Continental Cattle Company books. Several decks of cards, the seals unbroken, that came from a firm that dealt in cleverly marked cards. Four pairs of loaded dice in separate boxes. A key ring with an expert assortment of skeleton keys and pick-locks. A small shot filled leather blackjack with a short whalebone flexible handle and a leather loop to hang the deadly weapon from a man's wrist. And a snub-nosed .38 belly gun in a leather holster that fitted inside the waistband of a man's pants and leather buttonholes to fasten to the suspender buttons. All kept in the locked saratoga trunk.

All his text books on the shelves. His drawing board and T square and box of mechanical drawing compasses and dividers and slide rules in a leather case.

All that he owned, except the clothes on his back. Willard Slade felt empty and cold and sick inside as he sat his horse, staring bleakly with glazed eyes at the burnt ruins of the log cabin. The cabin he always had padlocked.

Then he let horse horse take him to the barn where he unsaddled mechanically and turned his horse in the pasture. He walked with a shuffling lead footed gait to the lighted cook cabin.

Through the window he saw Dave Stuart and the other cowpunchers sitting at the table. The cook was clearing the table and they sat there augering over their coffee. Big Dave Stuart, a-straddle of his bench, smoking, a half empty cup of black coffee in his hand. Talking in a low voice.

Then Willard Slade shoved open the

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door and came in, shutting the door behind him. He leaned against it as he felt the impact of every man's stare and they were cold eyed and unsmiling, grim.

Willard Slade knew that look of accusation. Slim Willie had faced many such accusing looks when he stood on trial at the reform school. It took all the guts and brains and cunning he could drag up out of his cold sick guts to stand there and eye them down. With a taut twisted grin on his lean face that was drained of color.

For a long, long moment there was a silence. And just about the time Slim Willie felt the cold sweat starting, big Dave Stuart broke that uneasy silence.

"Where did you get this?"

Dave took a watch from his pocket. It was a big open faced silver cased Elgin watch. It had a short chain of braided horsehair attached to the stem ring. He held it up by the short length of braided horsehair.

Willard Slade recognized that watch with its horsehair chain. He had taken it from the watch pocket of that tipsy young cowhand he had blackjacked and rolled. Along with a wallet that had about a hundred dollars in it and that ticket to Chinook, Montana. He had taken the money and the ticket and replaced the wallet. He had taken the watch because he had never owned a watch of his own. But here on the ranch he didn't need a watch because the days were regulated by sun time. And he had put the watch in the trunk with the money and other things in the tin box.

Willard Slade looked at the watch that dangled by the horsehair chain and he was thinking fast. He already had an answer by the time Dave Stuart repeated the question.

"Where did you get this watch, Slade?"

"I could ask you that same question, Stuart. I left my watch locked in my trunk. How come you got it, now?"

Dave Stuart laid the watch gently on the dining room table. He straddled the bench and now he swung one leg over it and his spur jingled as his boot hit the pineboard floor.

"Looks like I gotta drag it outa him."

Dave Stuart's mouth was set grimly and his puckered eyes were merciless.

"Tuck your shirttail in, Dave," said Willard Slade. "I don't know what all the fuss is about. But I paid five bucks for it at a hock shop. Uncle Ben's Pawn Shop. It's down near the stock yards district in Chicago. That horsehair chain was thrown in free for boot."

DAVE STUART was on his feet now. towering big as a grizzly. He stood there for a long time, legs spread, his big fists knotted. Just staring into Willard Slade's slate gray eyes. Probing as deep as was possible into a pair of eyes that were opaque as a gray slate. Then the big ramrod of the Three Links spoke, his words so toneless that there was no jarring beginning and left no abrupt ending to what he had to say.

"You musta left one of them damn cubeb cigareets going when you left your cabin. We was over at the corral halter breakin' some broncs when the cook sighted smoke comin' from your cabin and he set up a holler and started ringing the dinner bell. The cabin was padlocked and we had to bust it down. The whole inside was afire and we got buckets and wet sacks and blankets and fought the fire as best we could.

"Directly one of the boys sighted that tin trunk inside and we figgered it might hold your life's gatherment. The fire was shore a-blazin' and we had to rope that trunk and drag it outa the fire. The tin coverin' was so hot it blistered and sprung the seams and somebody throwed a few buckets of water on it and the lock sprung and the lid popped off like a jack-in-the-box."

Dave Stuart stubbed out the smoked butt of his brown paper cigaret between calloused thumb and forefinger. His grin was twisted.

"For a gentle Annie dude bookkeeper, that was one hell of an odd looking collection there on the tray of that trunk. A belly gun and a blackjack. Them skeleton keys. The cook bein' a sort of tinhorn gambler has a catalog where them decks of marked cards is sold, and the sets of loaded dice. And if I had that much money laid aside I shore wouldn't be keepin' a set of ranch books.

"Speakin' of ranch books, we found that set of books you had hid in your trunk. And the map of the Three Links ranch

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and all its holdin's. I'll keep the set of books and the map to send to the stockholders.

"All the rest of it belongs to you, Slade. The burglar keys and the black jack and belly gun, the marked cards and loaded dice. Everything else you're welcome to keep and haul away from here when you get to hell gone.

"All but this watch and chain. You say you paid five bucks for the watch. Here's your five dollars."

Dave Stuart shoved the money into the breast pocket of Willard Slade's checked flannel. He stood that close to him. And he reached out and grabbed the shirt up close to the collar and twisted. Holding Willard Slade, he shook him until his head popped on his skinny neck. So hard that his jaw slacked and his teeth bit down on his tongue. Then he quit shaking him. And there was a quiet cold anger inside the big ramrod that whitened his lips and showed in his slitted cold gray blue eyes.

"I've got no way of provin' that you lie, Slade. If I had one little bitty kind of proof, I'd choke you to death right here and right now while these boys was a-watchin' me kill you.

"One of the boys will hook a team to the old buckboard. Your trunk is already loaded on it. I wouldn't ask any man to set alongside a thing like you to drive you forty miles. You'll go alone. But there'll be a couple of boys go along a-horseback and if you sweat a hair of that gentle old team, they got orders to set you afoot with your trunk anywheres along the road."

Dave Stuart opened the door with one hand. He had Willard Slade collared with the other. He gave him a shove and a savage kick that sent Willard Slade sprawling on his face. Then Dave Stuart slammed the door shut.

He was white lipped and his big hands clenched and un-clenched. When he spoke his voice was unsteady, harsh.

"A man has to be dead certain. But I'd gamble all I got on it."

Dave Stuart picked up the big open faced silver watch. Looking at it. Turning it face down in the palm of his hand. The silver back was scratched with old minute little marks. There was a small dent in it.

"Even without that horsehair watch chain I'd know this old turnip. It belongs to me and I packed it for years and whenever there was a beef herd to hold I turned it over to you boys for a guard watch. There might be a thousand of the same make and turned out alike as so many peas in a pod. But I could pick it out of that thousand for mine. Sometimes in a hurry of a dark night on guard a man would shove it in his watch pocket as he hit a high trot and a lot of them leetle scratches comes from the copper rivets on a man's Levi overalls. And that dent in 'er. I mind how it got there. When a horse stumbled and piled up on me one night when they was a runnin', the saddle horn made that dent. And for days later there was a black and blue mark on my hip bone. But she never stopped tickin'.

"The ol' boy that braided that watch chain. You remember Marvin Rawls. Got on one of them wild drunks and run off half a dozen head of Three Links work horses and peddled 'em to some Miles City farmer for jug money and hell there was nothin' the outfit could do but send Marve to the pen. He sent me that danged horsehair watch chain to show there was no hard feelin's. Said the watch chain was his first convict horsehair braidin' job and he'd be tacklin' a horsehair bridle next. I fastened the horsehair watch chain to the guard watch. Marve's about due to come outa the pen anytime now."

Dave Stuart kept looking at the big silver watch.

"Bud Stuart was on last guard and we was holdin' the beef herd back on the ridge. We moved the herd on down to the yards and I told Bud to lope on to camp and change horses. And to throw what clean clothes he needed into his warsack and fetch it. He'd bin devilin' me all along to go to Chicago with the next trainload we shipped out. Bud was wild and would git drunk and hell around and I figgered one big drunk in Chicago might top it off and he'd come back so broke he'd have to wire for money to come home and he'd be in the hole so deep he'd settle down fer the winter and make a hand

"He was so doggoned excited he plumb fergot to hand me back my guard watch and tickled as a kid with his first pair of

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red-topped boots. And I couldn't help but feel kinda happy for him, myself. It was the first time in his life that Bud had ever bin outa Montana. In the stockyards that day he done the work of half a dozen cowhands and he kept a-laughin'. It was blowin' a wind and the dust so thick you could cut it and now and then, like you boys remember, young Bud would let out a holler, whenever he slammed a door on a cattle car shut and quickly fastened the bull-bar down.

"I'm Chicago bound. Another car loaded. Chicago bound!"

"I recollect," said a Three Links cowhand.

"I'll stay at Jackknife Ben's and buy all you boys a brand new jackknife. With your name on it. I'll have Jackknife Ben mark the Three Links on one side and Dave's name on the other. And Bud Stuart shore kept his word. We got the shipment of all of them jackknives. Like he said.

"Now and then down in the yards you'd hear him holler up outa that dust. Askin' some cowpuncher who'd bin there, how to git to Hinkey Dink's.

"And it wasn't till the train was pullin' out and Bud Stuart, covered from the hocks both ways with cow manure and dust, standin' there on the back platform of the caboose, wavin' his hat like the President of the United States, Teddy Roosevelt himself, bowin' and a-wavin' his hat, that I remembered he had the guard watch in his Levi pocket."

"Sittin' my horse there near the yards, I waved my hat and hollered after Bud not to lose that guard watch.

"He heard me and hollered out that he'd shore keep 'er wound."

Dave Stuart stood there, holding the watch with its horsehair prison-made watch chain in his hand.

"And that was the last I ever seen of my kid brother Bud—alive. When I got a wire tellin' me a cowboy had been picked up dead, blackjacked from behind and robbed, I caught the next train to Chicago. To identify my kid brother Bud. And fetch him home to bury him on his home range.

"The Stockholders of the Continental Cattle Company put up a reward for his killer and footed the expense. I had a talk with the Police Chief and the detective on the Stockyards detail.

"I remembered to tell them about the guard watch and described it. They always watch the hock shops. They sent me about half a dozen watches of the same make and I sent 'em all back.

"It was right after Bud's funeral that I hired this Willard Slade at Chinook."

Dave Stuart held the watch in his hand. When he looked up, his eyes were bleak as a winter sky.

"Willard Slade lied, boys. He never bought this watch at a hock shop. Not at Uncle Ben's Pawn Shop or at any other pawn shop. And what I'm a-tellin' you boys, don't let it git told anywhere outside this room.

"From here on," said Dave Stuart, "we'll play it under the table. Give Mister Slim Willie Slade enough rope and could be he'll hang himself. I'm about talked out."

III

WILLARD SLADE sat on the spring seat of the buckboard with his fire-blistered tin saratoga trunk on the slatted bed of the buckboard and roped on to secure it, the lines limp in his hands. Letting the team travel at a sluggish trot. Forty miles by the wagon road from the ranch to Chinook while the half moon rode its way slowly across the star-filled Montana sky. And for the first few miles Slim Willie was wrapped in a sort of somnambulistic daze. Like a man moves while he's turning around in his sleep. The rattle of the buckboard wheels, the rough rocky bumps in the rutted wagon road, the creak of harness leather and the rattle of the chain tugs, all were sort of muffled sounds and he felt no lurch or rough jolts of the moving buckboard. His long skinny frame with the bony shoulders sagged and his hands in his lap gripping the two lines loosely. His belly cold and the nerves knotted inside like a twisted snarled tangle and the chill creeping through his guts. There seemed to be an actual weight around his heart to slow his pulse beat. While a numbness clouded his brain and he could not think with any sort of clarity. It might have been shock that numbed him, and it was doubtful if a man

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had slapped or hit him if he would have felt the pain.

Slim Willie wore a rather loud plaid checkered flannel shirt and a pair of Levi overalls and a pair of cheap store high-heeled boots. He rather admired himself in what he called his cowboy garb. Though his shirt was too loud and his store boots cheap and his wide brimmed hat crowned hat limp and shapeless from the rain and weather, and he still had his pair of dollar spurs on. In his phony cheap would-be cowboy outfit he rode the buckboard and there was something pitiful in his slumped utter dejection.

"That damned watch." His lips moved stiffly but the words made no sound. "That —damned—watch."

Slim Willie prided himself on his cunning. And that pride had been humbled. Like sticking a pin in a toy balloon. That pride had collapsed. That was a part of it. He had taken that watch, because he had never owned a watch. Too frugal and miserly to even buy an Ingersoll dollar watch. He had stolen the watch and hidden it. To take it out and wind it and admire it and put it back in the trunk. If he had ever gone to town dressed in his store clothes he would have worn it. He might have even bought a cheap silk ribbon watch fob to go with it.

When he had spotted that tipsy cowboy in a saloon near the Chicago stockyards buying drinks for the house, he had followed him into the dark alley and sapped him behind the ear. When he had rolled him of his wallet and taken the loose change in his pocket, emptied the folding money and the train ticket from the wallet and shoved the wallet back into the cowboy's pocket, he had seen the watch and lifted it. Slim Willie had left the cowboy lying there limp in the alleyway. His quick ears had caught the sound of some cop walking his beat and Slim Willie had slipped away quickly into the night. Never dreaming that he had blackjacked the tipsy cowboy to death. He hadn't meant to kill him. Only sap him, to knock him out cold for a few minutes. Slim Willie had used that blackjack before on several occasions when he couldn't run away and found himself cornered and had to fight like a vicious cornered rat. But that was the first and last time Slim Willie had ever sapped a man from behind. And until right now, tonight, he never knew or even suspicioned that he had killed that tipsy cowboy. Or that he had killed Dave Stuart's kid brother Bud—Bud Stuart.

Willard Slade had been hanging around the cowtown of Chinook for a week or ten days or so. The Three Links outfit had come to town to attend a funeral. One of their cowboys had died in Chicago and his body shipped back and the dead cowboy was the younger brother of Dave Stuart, the ramrod of the Three Links. Slim Willie hadn't given it a second thought. He was picking up eating money playing pool and he was too busy milking pool money from what he contemptuously referred to in his own cunning mind as the local yokels, to give much thought to anything but his pool game

When he had heard that the Three Links ranch needed a bookkeeper he had hired out to Dave Stuart. Luck had favored him and he'd gotten his chance to move out to a ranch and into the clean dry fresh air and cure the bug in his lungs. And once he got out there he set himself to the job of getting all the fresh air he needed. The death of Bud Stuart and the talk about it had gone in one ear and out the other and then the topic was shelved by the Three Links cowhands.

And so engrossed had Slim Willie become in curing his lung ailment that the watch and any connection it had with the death of Bud Stuart had been wholly ignored. Because Slim Willie never for one moment ever suspected that he had killed that tipsy cowboy in a Chicago alley.

It was a blind spot in his otherwise cunning shrewd eye. He muttered "That damned watch—"

Willard Slade smoked cubeb cigarettes. He had a catarrhal ailment and a clerk in a Chicago drug store used to swipe the cubebs by the carton and peddle them cheap. The cubeb smoke pulled deep into his lungs and exhaled slowly seemed to clear up the stuffy clogged membranes when he awoke in the morning. That morning he'd overslept. He'd worked late the previous night locked in his cabin and the shades drawn, on his

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private set of books. While he dressed he'd smoked his morning cubeb. Cubeb ashes on a cigarette have a tendency to shed off easily and the burning coal of the ash must have dropped off and fallen on the blanket and the blankets and tarp he'd thrown aside when he left the bed had been hastily thrown back to cover his pillow. So much for that.

The day that had begun so well, climaxed by his contact with the Surveyor Mack Burkey with whim he found a kindred spirit, talking out their plans and laying the foundation for future plans, gave Slim Willie the notion that he was actually riding his luck. And on the ride home he had worked out that cunning plan to its completion and further on to the severing of the partnership, and by the time Slim Willie reached the ranch, he was riding his luck high, wide and handsome. Willard Slade's head was high in the stars as they came out in the sky. Lost in dreams of grandeur, his air castle built up into the heavens.

Then he had smelled smoke and reined up and looked down at the drenched charred ashes of that castle. Burnt. And in that sodden charred smell the stench of fear and dread came from the burnt debris to clog his nostrils.

It had taken all the trapped-rat-like guts Willard Slade had to open the door into the lamplit cook cabin. It had called up all his craven courage to stand with his back against the door and face Dave Stuart. The big ramrod with that silver watch in his hand and his narrowed probing stare. To eye him back and gather his cunning. Not to open the door and run. And in the silence that watch was ticking. Slim Willie could hear it and the ticking sound dinned against his ear drums as it ticked off each minute kept pace with Willard Slade's rapid pulse.

WILLARD SLADE saw his trunk roped on the buckboard. He had stood there numb, while his team was hooked up. Then he was told to climb onto the seat and the lines were shoved in his hands.

"I looked for Dave Stuart to kill 'im," Willard Slade overheard one of the men say as he linked the chain tugs. "That's the guard watch But was packin' when he got knocked in the head and killed back in Chicago."

"Them marked cards—and loaded dice. How much of your wages you dropped to that tinhorn?"

"No more than we all donated. Slim Willie's gittin' off easy. Vigilante Days, such skunks was hung. Or tarred and feathered and rode around on a rail with plenty of splinters. I don't know why Dave didn't make him walk to town with that trunk roped on his back."

Mebbyso Dave couldn't stand the sight of him no longer without killin' 'im, and wanted to git him outa sight quick."

"All right, tinhorn, start rollin' them buckboard wheels. We're ridin' herd on you all the way to town."

"That damned watch—"

The two cowboys rode along behind. But Willard Slade never once looked back. It was as if all his back trail lay uncovered. For all men to see. Look at with contempt. That tin trunk had all his life's secrets locked up in it. All his craftiness and cunning and trickery. And they had broken it open to reveal it all as cheap and shabby and unclean and tainted as it was in the eyes of honest men. And some of it was still there in that saratoga trunk, its lock broken and its tin warped and blistered. They'd roped down the lid and tied it on the buckboard, so that he might take all his shabby trickery along with him when he was kicked off the Three Links ranch. It was like a brand that told the cow country that Willard Slade was unclean, a cheap tinhorn. That tin trunk was roped to the seat so that when he straightened up the sharp edges of broken tin bit into him like sharp pointed knives. But when he finally straightened up and the jagged tin bit through the checked flannel of his shirt and every jolt jogged the tin edges into his hide, Willard Slade welcomed the pain. He would lean back and feel the stabbing needles of pain and his thin lips pulled back away from his teeth in a sort of ghastly grin.

Willard Slade was in a black depressed mood when he shook off the numbed feeling and for a while he was filled with self pity. He'd never had a decent chance in life. A convict's son. He had no memory of his mother at all, but he'd been told she

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was a can-can dancer. Brought up in a reform school, Willard Slade had never had a decent chance. Cold decked and the marked cards against him.

The pain was needling away that self pity.

"Quit feelin' so damned sorry for yourself. They can't prove a damned thing by that watch. Can't prove I lied when I claimed I got it out ofa hock shop. They got the map, but I got it in my head. And Mack Burkey has a better one. Them damned books I kept will do me no good. I discarded that notion anyhow when Mack Burkey showed me a better scheme. Who the hell wants to be General Manager of a ranch when it's forty miles from town? I'm no damn country boy. I'm what the yokels call a city slicker. I'm a tinhorn. That's what they call me. Tinhorn, hell, when I'm done trimmin' Dave Stuart and his Three Links, it'll be high stakes. And I'll damn sure take that big mouth to a cleanin'. Once I get to that hick town of Chinook I'll figure something out. It's just a tank town and a whistle stop on the railroad map. But there's money there, big dough, lousy with it. When I've made it, I'll blow. But I'll be ridin' the plush cushions back to Chicago, or to San Francisco, with a bankroll.

"I'll open up an office—Willard Slade's Office."

He leaned back until the jagged tin bit deep. Till the tiny cuts drew blood. There were tin rips in the back of his shirt and its flannel sodden with blood and the blood dried and crusted and his skinny back looked as if he had lain strapped on a spiked torture rack. But the pain was welcome and he kept telling himself over and over and over again that he would never again get careless. He'd deal 'em off the bottom of the deck and every card he dealt Dave Stuart would go into the making of a losing hand. And when all the chips were down, Willard Slade would turn over his own cards and rake in the big jackpot. And when he rode the plush cushions back to the Big City he would stand on the rear platform of the observation car and spit on the cowtown of Chinook.

But Dave Stuart wouldn't be there to watch his departure. Dave Stuart would be just as dead as his kid brother Bud. Slim Willie would get that job done neatly but he hadn't figured out just how.

Willard Slade had lost all his wardrobe and his text books. But he could afford to buy new clothes and he chose in his mind his suits. He'd pick out neckties and sox to match, and shoes and town hats. No more clodhopper boots, or this play-cowboy hat.

IT WAS sometime between daybreak and sunrise and the two Three Links cowboys had dropped behind a mile or so, when Willard Slade drove his slow trotting team up to a man on foot who sat dejectedly on the ground beside the wagon road. And reined up.

The man was bareheaded and had on an old black and orange striped turtle necked sweater and a pair of dirty white track pants and a pair of lightweight gymnasium shoes. He had one shoe unlaced and the wool sock off and was nursing a badly swollen sprained ankle. His face was pain twisted and he sat there cursing.

"Hell I didn't need road work—fit as a fiddle—wind good and not an ounce overweight. But he tells me to get out at daybreak and do roadwork. Hell, I wouldn't a-minded joggin' around a track, but this damned freight wagon road. Hell of a trainer. Labor Day two weeks off. He'll lose the thousand-dollar forfeit he laid on the line. Serve him right. As a trainer he's a good bartender."

"Who?"

The footracer got to his feet, holding his injured foot off the ground and hanging onto the wagon wheel. Willard Slade helped him onto the buckboard seat. His heart was pounding fast. He was thinking fast.

"Jack McAllister—they call him 'Sport McAllister. Owns the Last Chance and he's bin coverin' all bets, that his man can outrun Skeeter White. Damnit. Ow! Half a mile. It was in the bag. Damnit to hell!"

Willard Slade was pulling off his boots, using his spurs for a bootjack. He told the footracer to take off his other shoe and handed him the lines. The footracer's breath stank of sour stale booze.

In his sock feet Slim Willie skinned off his Levi overalls and stood on the ground in his red flanned underwear. He picked

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up the racer's other shoe and laced the pair on. They were a good fit. The footracer watched him narrowly, his pain forgotten. Slade yanked his blood-caked shirt off. He wore no undershirt and the man stared at his lacerated back where the blood scabs had come off with the shirt and the little cuts were oozing blood.

"Pace me." Willard Slade threw the shapeless hat as far as he could sail it across the sagebrush, and trotted off ahead on the road to town.

"Take care of that trunk of mine," Slim Willie called back.

When the two Three Links cowboys caught up to the Buckboard, Slim Willie was half a mile ahead and traveling at a fast clip.

"What the hell!" One rider looked after Slim Willie.

"Search me, cowboy. But if he can keep up that speed—stick a feather duster in them red flannel drawers and he'd be flyin'. That Skeeter White couldn't see him for dust he'd kick in that roundup cook's eyes. Lookit them legs. That boy's a natural. Who is he, anyhow?"

"Prison bait!"

IV

IT LOOKED as if Willard Slade had come into his own. He was taking his spot in the sun, and Slim Willie was the man to make the most of his opportunity to bask in that sunlight. Regardless of the Three Links and its ramrod Dave Stuart and in spite of all hell and hard luck.

Sport McAllister, saloon keeper and gambler, crooked as snake tracks, was short and paunchy with a pair of cauliflower ears and a splayed nose and a whiskey-veined skin, looked with bloodshot hard blue eyes that squinted from under battered brows and he nodded as he clicked his stop watch. In the early dawn with nobody around, the Sport had timed Slim Willie for the half mile distance. And decided he had found himself a footracer. Pleased as a prospector who had discovered an El Dorado, a bonanza.

"But we'll keep it to ourselves, Slim Willie." He threw a blanket across Willard Slade's shoulders. "If you got six-bits to bet on yourself, hand it over and I'll get odds. Who the hell done that pen-knife work on your back, huh?"

"Compliments of Dave Stuart and the Three Links, Sport." Slim Willie was blowing and the sweat rolled off his bare hide. Get me a pair of spiked tracks shoes and I'll cut that time down a few seconds."

"I'll get you any damned thing you ask for, Slim Willie. Cripes! Where'd you learn to run?"

"Reform school." Slim Willie's grin twisted across his sweaty face. He could talk cold turkey to the saloon man. "I got six-bits. Cover all the money Dave Stuart and the Three Links outfit lay on the line. And tell them that it's my dough. And damn the odds!"

"It'll be a pleasure," said Sport McAllister. "I don't like that outfit. Dave Stuart, the ramrod, or any part of it. Dave Stuart marked the Last Chance on his blacklist. Claimin' my booze was rotgut moonshine and my gamblin' game was crooked. He'd fire a man who took a drink or sat in a poker game at my joint. Tore up his brother Bud's I.O.U.'s that I held for his gamblin' debts. And I let him git into me for a couple of thousand bucks. I don't like the Three Links outfit."

Willard Slade had found for himself another kindred spirit. But he wasn't telling the saloon man anything. Sport McAllister would pick up the ugly story soon enough.

"I'd like a place to live. Not a hotel room. A cabin of my own. Private."

"I got the cabin. Back of the Last Chance. I'll have the swamper clean it up. But no booze. No wimmin. And you'll live on trainin' table grub. That footracer I fetched in to beat Skeeter White was a boozer, sneakin' off after bed time to go to the honkytonk. If he hadn't bin guzzlin' booze he'd never got awkward and twisted his ankle."

"I don't drink and I haven't the dough to spend on percentage gals and what you tell the Chink to cook for grub is good enough."

Slim Willie wiped the sweat off with the towel he had hung around his neck.

"If you could put me on for a dealer—percentage basis—I might pick up a dollar."

"You're in, pal." Sport McAllister

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grinned, showing a double set of gold teeth, upper and lower plates. He saw Slim Willie's glance, and took them out and held them admiringly in his stubby broken knuckled hand. Then popped them back into his mouth. "Only set of store teeth, all gold, this side of Chicago."

IN A WEEK Willard Slade was settled in his log cabin back of the Last Chance, his wardrobe replenished. And he was firmly established as head gambler in the card rooms at the back of the Last Chance. He was sitting pretty. Sport McAllister was a power in the underworld of the cow town of Chinook. He owned a couple of smaller saloons and he owned the Honkytonk. And he was the uncrowned king of the gambling brotherhood. And Slim Willie was his fair-haired boy and nothing could touch him. When Sport McAllister heard about the watch and its connection with Dave Stuart's murdered brother Bud, the saloon man called Slim Willie into his saloon office. He uncorked a bottle of old bonded whiskey and filled two shot glasses and corked the bottle.

"I'm askin' no questions, Slim Willie. I don't want to know a damn thing about it." He handed Willard Slade a filled glass. Lifted his own to touch the filled brims.

They drank in silence. Their eyes looking at each other. Like the secret handgrip of some inner lawless fraternal brotherhood.

"A man was asking for Willard Slade. While you was dealing 'em in the back room. I told him to come back later. He's Mack Burkey the surveyor, and he was a little drunk. Somebody turned him in for boozing on the job and he's fired. Said his business with you was important. But it's always important when a guy wants to hit you up for a loan."

"I'll see Mack."

"It might cost you anyhow a sawbuck, Slim Willie. He had the bartender put it on the cuff. Mack's a hell of a good surveyor if it wasn't for the booze. Soured on the world, but it's his own boozer's fault. I'm a two-bottle guy myself and the rotgut lost me my chance at the lightweight title. But in this racket it don't matter. I drink with the boys and every round of drinks the house buys there's ten rounds that go into the cash register. Play it close to your belly, Slim Willie, and trail your bets with mine and you can't lose. You'll be wearin' diamonds. Double cross me just once and you're in the gutter and I've made a bum out of more than one guy who got out of line." Sport McAllister's eyes were slivers of cold steel.

"You'll find Mack Burkey in his hotel room. I gave him a quart. He'll take it to bed."

But Mack Burkey was waiting in the night's shadow, sitting with his back to the log wall of Slim Willie's cabin. Slim Willie had gone there first and had his key in the lock when Mack Burkey moved.

Willard Slade had his belly gun in his hand.

"It's Mack. Put away the gun. Kinda jumpy, aren't you Slim Willie?"

"Yeah." Slim Willie unlocked the door. Mack Burkey came in with his bottle. He had the rolled map tucked under his arm.

When the door was shut and bolted and window blind pulled, Willard Slade lit the lamp.

"I saw the Labor Day program posted on the hand bills. Slim Willie matched in a footrace against Skeeter White. Skeeter's a roundup cook. Worked for the Three Links. You wouldn't be likely to throw away that race to Skeeter?"

"No. I've got all the money I own bet on myself. Covered by Dave Stuart and his Three Links cowboys. I'd cut my own throat before I threw that race." Slim Willie's snarling lean face was livid. Hands clenched.

"Okay, brother, keep your fancy shirt on. I was ribbin' you," Mack Burkey pulled the cork of his bottle with his teeth and spat it onto the table.

"News gets around, Slim Willie. Both sides of the railroad tracks. But be careful you don't run that half mile with a track suit of tar and feathers. Or don't you ever get north of the tracks? Where the hotel is. And the Square Deal Saloon where Dave Stuart and the Three Links cowhands do their drinkin'. I'm just tippin' you off to what I heard north of the tracks."

A flat grin spread across Mack Burkey's sunburnt whiskey-flushed face. But

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there was a cunning crafty gleam in his pale blue eyes.

"You were run off the Three Links ranch. I got the can tied to my drunken tail. But somehow you landed on your feet and you are now Sport McAllister's fair-haired boy. His footracer and his boss gamblin' man. The toast of the honkytonks. Win that footrace and you'll swing the percentage gals wadin' knee deep in champagne."

Mack Burkey gripped the neck of his whiskey bottle till the big knuckles showed bone white.

"I'm broke!" The big lanky Missourian's voice was a nasal whining snarl. "But Sport McAllister is wrong. I'm not hitting you up for a loan. I'm here on business. Or have you forgotten the deal we made?"

"I never forget anything."

"You forgot to throw away Dave Stuart's watch when you knocked his brother Bud on the head in some Chicago alley. And rode to Chinook on his railroad ticket."

Slim Willie paled. His hand was on the butt of his holstered .38 belly gun. There was murder glinting in his slate-gray eyes.

Mack Burkey grinned and took a stiff drink. He shuddered as the rotgut booze hit his belly. And shook his head.

"You're riding your luck, Slim Willie. I'm a drunken surveyor tramp. But murder is murder. And I never pack a gun so it wouldn't do you any good to plant one on my dead carcass. I was just takin' a peek at your hole card, Slim Willie, and you've got a dirty blood-stained deuce buried in the hole. So's we'll know where we stand. So you're goin' all the way in on that deal we made. We'll forget this footracing for the moment. And talk cold turkey. This cabin stinks like a Chinee hop joint." He sniffed.

"Cubebs." Willard Slade snapped open a silver cigarette case and took one. "It stinks in here. No doubt about it, Mack. You brought the stink in with you. It stinks of blackmail."

Mack Burkey took a small drink this time. He put down the bottle and unrolled the map. Spreading it out on the table and weighting the four corners down with books.

"While you were training for your footrace," said Mack Burkey, "I've been busy on this deal. I've got ten men hired and waiting for their further orders. Each of those men had reason to hate Dave Stuart and the Three Links outfit he's ramrodding. I told them nothing. But I paid them one hundred dollars apiece, cash in hand. And that took every dollar I had saved or collected on my final pay check. So I'm broke. I promised each of those five hundred dollars. I paid them a hundred apiece out of the promised five hundred dollars. The balance due comes out of your pocket, Slim Willie. You'll never miss it. You're in the chips, as Sport McAllister would put it.

"Those ten men are all set and waiting. Each man has a saddle horse and a horse to pack his bed. When I give the word, they'll go into the land office. And each will file homestead claims on the land where I tell them. And I'll be there, sober, in the land office, with my map. To check against theirs. I've got separate lists of the descriptions of each homestead and as each man comes in I'll hand him his slip of paper giving the exact description and figures from my map of the homestead he's filing on.

"There may be trouble. Dave Stuart and his Three Links cowboys won't take it lying down. If they want fight, by the hell they'll get a bellyful of it. Mebbyso a bellyfull of bullets, if it comes to a tough showdown. Let 'em get tough as they want to get.

"I've got a man hired who is tougher than big Dave Stuart. He's an ex-convict who was just released from the Deer Lodge pen. Where Dave Stuart and the Three Links Continental Cattle Company sent him to prison for horse stealing. His name is Marvin Rawls. When he got out of the Deer Lodge pen, he came here to Chinook. That ex-convict showed up here in hopes of paying off his prison debt. And I've made Marvin Rawls the leader of the ten homesteaders. I gave him his choice of the line camp homesteads. He's the only one of the ten who knows what the game is. By the eternal hell, we're all set and rearin' to go. And you're in on the deal so deep you can't back out."

"Nobody told you I wanted to back out of the deal, Mack. You're stinkin' drunk or you wouldn't go off half-cocked. I'll check it off as so much whisky talk on the blackmail angle. You couldn't keep me

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out of that deal we made at your survey camp. We're partners."

Mack Burkey was unshaved and his khaki shirt and his pants tucked into high laced surveyors boots were dirty and rheumy with sweat stains and the big rawboned Missourian stank with a rank sour stale smell. His whisky breath was fetid and sour and Slim Willie's nostrils were clogged and he felt nauseated. He backed away as far as he could while Mack Burkey took a pencil and pointed at the detailed map.

Willie lit another cubeb cigaret to kill the stench. And took a hundred dollar bill from his gambler's roll. The bankroll was Sport McAllister's money. Counted over to his head dealer who was accountable for every dollar of the house money he carried. He tossed the hundred dollar bill on the map. Mack Burkey let it lie there.

"To get a bath and haircut and shave and some clothes that don't stink. And pay for a hotel room, Mack. It's a loan."

"You'll kick through with more than that, Slim Willie. I still owe each of those ten homesteaders four hundred bucks apiece. And five hundred extra for Marvin Rawls. I'll want it all in cash."

"Ten men. Four hundred apiece. That's four thousand dollars. Five hundred extra for this ex-convict. I don't have that much money."

"How much dough in that gambler's roll you flashed on me?"

"That's Sport McAllister's house money. I signed for it. Not a dollar belongs to me."

"I don't care were it comes from. The homesteaders aren't choosey. Kick through with forty-five hundred dollars." Mack Burkey's grin was an ugly bitter grimace.

"I'll get along without the bath and barbering and I'll wear the clothes I got on. I want that money to-night. Right now. Marvin Rawls is waiting for the dough. He's ramrodding this homestead outfit and he wants it all in cash and tonight. They're filin' on the land tomorrow."

"I don't have the money. This is the Last Chance bankroll. Sport McAllister's bankroll."

Mack Burkey helped himself to a big drink. He talked with the bottle in his hand.

"You're the Sport's footracer and his adopted white haired boy. If I had the dough I'd pay it to Marvin Rawls and to hell with you, mister. And then I'd watch you hang for the murder of Bud Stuart. You're livin' on borrowed time, you tinhorn sport. Cheatin' time from the hangman's rope. Before some Chicago dick taps you on the shoulder and snaps the steel bracelets on. You'll need big money for a one way ticket to Honduras. Time's slippin'. Once the homesteaders are located, the Continental Cattle Company will kick through with more than plenty for both of us. Or we'll burn their winter haysticks. There's now law that says a man can't burn his own haystack. But we gotta work fast. Marvin Rawls is waitin for the money. You better kick through, Slim Willie. Or would you rather hang?"

Willard Slade took out the bankroll and commenced peeling off banknotes.

V

WHEN Mack Burkey left the cabin, taking his bottle and his sour stale stench with him, Willard Slade stood in the doorway. A cold chill worming through his guts and nausea slowly churning his belly. He was going to be sick but he waited, swallowing down the nausea until the drunken surveyor had lurched out of sight. Then he went outside and around the corner of the cabin and got down on all fours and retched. The vomiting shook his lean frame and then he was seized by a fit of coughing that left him so weak that he was staggering like a drunken man when he went back into the cabin. His face showed gray as ashes and when he wiped the cold sweat off with a clean towel. There was frothy blood on his lips. He had been coughing blood. He washed in cold water and lit a cubeb cigarette. His hands shook, holding the lighted match. He put on a clean shirt and when he knotted his tie he saw his reflection in the mirror. His slate-gray eyes were bloodshot and there was a stricken look in the opaque depths.

"I've thrown another ruby." He meant another hemorrhage.

Willard Slade looked up at the neatly lettered motto he'd printed and framed and had hung above his shaving mirror.

"LET NO MAN MADE LAWS, NOR

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ANY COMMANDMENT OF GOD, STAND BETWEEN A MAN AND HIS GOAL IN LIFE!"

Willard Slade grinned mirthlessly. Then locking the cabin door, he walked over to the Last Chance. And into Sport McAllister's private office.

"I'm short five thousand dollars, Sport. I've got three thousand bet on myself in the footrace and if I win, you collect it all."

The saloon man nodded, poker faced. "Mack Burkey?" he asked flatly.

"Yeah. Mack Burkey. Blackmail. We were in on a deal. If you want in on it, here's the layout. But I'm backing out. Fed up with Mack Burkey."

Willard Slade made it brief. And the Sport listened in silence. He got out his bottle and two shot glasses and filled the glasses and they drank in silence. The saloon keeper poured Willard another drink and said to down it, that he looked green around the gills.

"I wouldn't touch it with a ten foot pole. For more than one reason. Mack Burkey is a boozer and he'd turn on his best friend if he had a friend. Treacherous. When you were peeling off the folding money he lost his pride and wanted five hundred for himself. Blackmail is dirty. And what you're doing to the Three Links stinks in my nose and I can stand bad odors without puking. You hate Dave Stuart's guts. But that's no way to get even. You like money, sure. But not bad enough to shake down the Continental Cattle Company and the shakedown stinks with the same blackmail Mack Burkey used on you Why don't you draw out and let Mack Burkey handle it alone? Mack for all his drunken slobber was only guessing at the score. He can't go to the Law with anything they don't already suspect. You never meant to kill Bud Stuart. If you did, it was an accident. Keep your nose clean on this squatter homestead deal."

"That's what I meant when I told you I was fed up, Sport. I dealt myself out tonight. I'll pay you back when I win the footrace."

"Skip it and to hell with it. Anyhow we'll win it back. Marvin Rawls will bet it all on Skeeter White. And I mean all of it." He poured a drink.

"I'll let you in on something. Dave Stuart is the man who got Marvin Rawls outa the pen and he got Marve out on a clean pardon. Marve Rawls was wild locoed drunk and guilty as hell and he pleaded guilty as hell. He's goin' back to work for the Three Links. When the land office opens in the mornin', Mack Burkey will be there like he said. Marvin Rawls will show up, plenty prompt and he'll have ten men with him. They'll all be Three Links cowpunchers.

"They'll file on the line camp homesteads and keep on holdin' down their jobs with the Three Links. It will be a horse on Mack Burkey. Marvin Rawls keeps the money, and he's bettin' every dollar of it on Skeeter White and Sport McAllister covers all bets. Those Three Links cowhands are filin' on the homesteads for free and it won't cost the Three Links more than a round of drinks. That's what is known as loyalty, Slim Willie. And it's a word we neither of us ever learned at any reform school. I went to one of those reform schools, too, and while you was studyin' to be at the head of the class, I was learnin' to box-fight. But it was dirty fightin' and I had to un-learn the dirty ring tricks. Hell, I'm no angel. I'm on the wrong side of the tracks. I sell rotgut to them as wants it, good booze to them that pay for it. My gamblin's straight. Until some smart tinhorn shows up, then I trim him at his own crooked game. But you give a fightin' dog a bad name—

"Bud Stuart drank and when he bought drinks he bought 'em for the house. He was a wild gambler and there was never a crooked card dealt him, but when I tried to collect on his I.O.U's, Dave Stuart tore 'em up. He claimed the bar bills was padded and the kid got cold decked. But I wouldn't knife him in the back like you and Mack Burkey aimed to get at him. I'll fight clean.

"You asked for what you got at the Three Links, Slim Willie. Now I'm done preachin'. You'd better go to bed and get some rest. You'll need it to win that footrace. Oh, yeah—Skeeter White claims he can beat you any distance. They're layin' two to one, Skeeter will outrun you for a mile—instead of the half mile. So for them odds I've agreed to double the half-mile

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distance. Still think you can beat Skeeter White in a mile race, Slim Willie?"

"With one leg broke. I'll kick gravel in his face all the way."

"Then that's the distance. Now get to bed. But watch Mack Burkey. He claims he dont pack a gun. He's got a .44 derringer in his pocket."

VI

THEY had harrowed and dragged the mile track that was used for horse racing. And the evening before Labor Day when Sport McAllister and Slim Willie had gone out after sundown to inspect the track, they had both seen the barrel of soft tar and a feather bed mattress there beside the start and finish line. The saloon man had cussed harshly and wanted to have it hauled off, but Slim Willie grinned flatly and said to let it stay.

They had walked back to the Last Chance in silence. Willard Slade said he was going to the cabin and to bed. It was dusk when he reached the cabin and unlocked the door. As he went in, Mack Burkey rose up from where he had been sitting by the cabin wall. Since the morning a few days before when Marvin Rawls had showed up with the ten Three Links cowhands to file on the line camp homesteads, Mack Burkey hadn't been seen. He was locked in his hotel room with a supply of whisky.

Gaunt, unshaven, his bloodshot pale blue eyes red rimmed in sunken sockets he shoved in before Slim Willie could get the door shut. He shut it and shot the bolt and leaned against it. He was ugly drunk and reeked of booze. When Willard Slade got the lamp lit he saw the little .44 derringer palmed in the drunken surveyor's big hand. His voice rasped.

"Tomorrow," Mack Burkey snarled, "you're goin' to throw that damned footrace. I got every dollar I own bet on Skeeter White at two to one odds in my favor. "Either throw that race or I'll cripple you so you can't win. You can't make fast time with a toe shot off." The derringer pointed at Slim Willie's foot.

Slim Willie grinned flatly and told Mack to sit down and take it easy. He leaned over to turn the lamp wick lower. Then blew out the light and jumped sideways.

The double barreled .44 derringer spat twin streaks of flame in the dark. Slim Willie had his snub nosed .38 belly gun in his hand and he shot at the derringer's gun flame as the .44 slugs missed. He heard Mack Burkey let out a snarling groan and he shot twice more before he heard the heavy dull crash of the lanky Missourian's body hit the floor. The lamp chimney was hot when Willard Slade lifted it but he felt no pain. When he got the lamp lit, he saw Mack Burkey dead on the floor with the derringer in his hand and his wide open eyes glazing.

He let the dead body lie there. Somebody tried the door from the outside.

"It's Sport. If you're Slim Willie, say so. If anybody else opens the door I'll kill him."

"I'm all right, Sport." Slim Willie was surprised at the steadiness of his voice. He opened the door.

Sport McAllister stepped inside and shut the door. He looked at the dead man. Then up at Slim Willie.

"I was here. Eye witness. It was self defense." The Sport did not smile.

He had never been in the cabin since Slim Willie moved in, and he cut a quick look around. His eyes fastened on the framed motto above the shaving mirror. He read it aloud in his usual flat-toned voice.

"Let no man made laws," he said, slowly, "nor any Commandment of God, stand between a man and his goal in life." McAllister crossed himself.

"My father coined that wise saying," said Willard Slade, "the day before he died in a prison cell at Sing Sing."

"It wouldn't look too good," said Sport McAllister, "for a coroner's jury to see, tomorrow after the race."

"Let it hang there." Willard Slade's tone was harsh.

"Suit yourself, Slim Willie. Let's lock this thing in here. You can sleep at my house. Tomorrow after the footrace we'll open up and show it to the law."

"You go back to the Last Chance. I'm bunkin' here." Willard Slade took a blanket from his bunk and covered the dead body.

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And lit a cubeb cigarette. The hands that held the match flame were steady.

"Mack wanted me to throw the footrace. He was going to shoot my toe off. You better go back to the Last Chance now. It'll be a heavy night. And thanks."

Willard Slade did not sleep that night. He turned the lamp low. Then he burned every keepsake he had treasured through the years in the stove. Leaving only his clothes. Then he lay fully clothed on his bunk, staring up at the ceiling. When the stench of Mack Burkey's stale sour odor came too from strong under the blanket, he lit another cubeb. Twice during the night a dry hacking cough came into his throat but he lay back quiet and pulled the cubeb smoke deep into his lungs. Perhaps the smoke helped. Perhaps it did no good.

Willard Slade was up at daybreak. He shaved and took a sponge bath. When Sport McAllister rapped on the door he was dressed in his best suit and a new white shirt and a polka dot tie and he had on blue sox and his black shoes were polished. He locked the cabin and went to breakfast with Sport McAllister at the Chink's. The footrace was scheduled for ten o'clock that morning and Slim Willie ate lightly. His skin, stretched tautly across the cheekbones, was gray except for dull red stains where the skin stretched across the cheekbones.

"You feel all right?" asked the saloon man.

"Like a winner."

"Get any sleep?"

"I didn't need any."

Dave Stuart and Marvin Rawls sat at a corner table at the Chink's. With them at the table were Skeeter White and a stranger. The stranger was a burly heavyset man in a brown derby pushed back on his bald head. Dave took the silver watch from his pocket and was holding it by its braided horsehair watchchain. The man in the derby nodded and looked at Willard Slade.

Detective was written all over the burly man in the derby and he might as well have worn his badge pinned to the lapel of his coat.

"A Chicago dick," said Slim Willie. "He's got copper written across that pot gut. With a bench warrant for Willard Slade in his pocket."

"And I got a shyster hired to spring you on a habeas corpus. I hate a cop."

Skeeter-White was looking at Slim Willie, sizing him up. Skeeter was a professional foot racer, who followed the county fairs. Gambling on the side. He always had a deck of marked cards and a pair of loaded dice in his pocket and he worked the shell game. The old army game, he called it. Between times he was a good ranch or roundup cook. Six feet six and bald as a poolball. Willard Slade had never mentioned footracing at the ranch.

"That Mack Burkey," Marvin Rawls was saying, "claims this Willard Slade over there was in on the deal the surveyor made me. Said he got the dough from this Slim Willie as he called him. Sport McAllister covered the bets. He'll git it back if he wins the footrace. You better not lose it, Skeeter." Marvin Rawls was a big man with hard gray eyes. A flat grin.

"If Slim Willie is in the lead," Skeeter grinned at the Chicago detective, "all you got to do is stand there with the law badge in your hand, dustin' it off with the bench warrant. It'll slow Slim Willie up till I git past."

Willard Slade sipped his coffee and stared over at them with his slate gray eyes. When Sport McAllister kicked back his chair and started for the other table Willard Slade was right behind the ex-pug.

"I didn't know you played dirty pool, Stuart." He looked straight at the big ramrod. "A tar barrel and a tick full of chicken feathers. Bringin' in this flatfoot the mornin' of the footrace. It looks cheap and phoney even to a guy on the wrong side of the tracks."

Dave Stuart flushed darkly.

"Marvin Rawls was Bud Stuart's runnin' mate," Sport went on. "Ask him if Bud Stuart was ever double charged for so much as one beer. Or if your kid brother Bud was ever dealt a crooked card. Bud Stuart bet 'em wild. Always bluffin' in a poker game. His bluffs got called. How's about it, Marve?"

"The Sport's tellin' you no lie, Dave."

"But you tore up the I.O.U's. Made a short-sport out of Bud Stuart", said Sport "You was damn wrong, Dave. You could be wrong a second time. Willard Slade

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might or might not have sapped Bud Stuart. But he sure as hell musta never meant to kill the kid. The worst you kin charge Willard Slade with is manslaughter. When this flatfoot serves his bench warrant I'll have a smart shyster right at his back with a paper to spring him.

"Slim Willie is my boy. Last evenin' a man pulled a gun on him and tried to scare him into throwin' the footrace. And that was his hard luck. Slim Willie wouldn't throw this footrace for all the foldin' money in the world—and he don't scare."

Sport McAllister looked straight at Skeeter White.

"Slim Willie's got both his big toes, Skeeter."

"What—what the hell you mean?"

"You was hid one mornin' when Willie ran the half mile. You clocked him. You're gettin' old but even in your prime you never ran the half mile in that fast time. You upped the distance to a mile. You still can't beat Slim Willie. So you loaned Mack Burkey your .44 derringer. Mack still has the pistol. You cheap humpty-dumpty shell game carnival tinhorn. Let's you and me get outa here, Slim Willie, where the air don't stink."

VII

THE crowd was lined up on either side of the start and finish line. Dave Stuart and his Three Links outfit, cowpunchers and cowmen from other outfits Skeeter White had cooked for, and the crowd of more respected citizens from north of the tracks. But news of the dressing down Sport McAllister had handed Dave Stuart and Skeeter White in the Chink's at breakfast time, had spread, and the crowd from the north side of the tracks was uneasy and subdued.

Sport McAllister and the crowd from south of the tracks were lined up across the track. Bartenders and gamblers and saloon keepers. The gals from the Honky-tonk dressed to the nines. And a lot of cowpunchers who owed allegiance to none and had their money bet on Slim Willie.

Slim Willie, in a pair of spotless white track pants. Spiked shoes. A bathrobe with his initials on the pocket thrown around his shoulders. He looked all skin and bones and there was a grayish pallor to his face, the gray skin stained dully across the cheekbones. His slate grey eyes looked the crowd over and his thin lipped mouth looked grim.

The half mile distance would have been gruelling enough. But a mile to travel—

Sport McAllister stood beside him. Waving a fistfull of hundred dollar bills. He kept calling out from time to time.

"Any part or all of it!" But there were no takers.

Skeeter White kept them waiting. It was an old trick to get an opponent nervous. He swaggered up with his handlers and shed a bright purple bathrobe. He had on a pair of vivid purple track shorts and spiked shoes.

When Slim Willie dropped his bathrobe the man's skinny back was a mass of fine scars, left there by the jagged tin of the saratoga trunk.

The two footracers lined up at the starting mark. Skeeter crowded close, his breath stinking of whisky. Slim Willie turned his head sideways.

"You try to spike me, Skeeter, and I'll rip both your legs wide open. Keep your distance. I killed Mack Burkey last night when he tried to use your derrigner. Spike me and I'll cut your legs out from under you, then rip your yellow belly open. Keep your distance."

"On your marks!" called the starter, a gun in his hand. "Get set!" Both runners crouched, digging their spikes in for the start.

The starter's gun tilted in the air. Exploded.

Slim Willie and Skeeter White left the starting mark together. And for the first hundred yards they matched stride for stride. And Skeeter on the rail. Skeeter setting the pace and setting it fast. Then he began slowing and he hugged the rail and Slim Willie kept stride for stride and they passed the quarter marker even. From the quarter to the half mile Skeeter held that fast stride and Slim Willie knew that Skeeter was keeping too fast a stride to ever hold it beyond the half mile marker. No miler ever set a pace that fast.

Slim Willie's lungs were getting tight. He wasn't blowing too hard but there was

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a tightness there and now and then a needle stabbed his heart. It went through him and there was a thin thread of pain as if the needle which had pierced its way through had drawn a thread behind it. And then it seemed as if something in his lungs was slowly ripping apart and it was like tearing a cigaret paper.

Before they reached the three quarter marker Skeeter lurched towards Willard and never changed his stride as he dropped a little behind. Skeeter was trying to spike him and Slim Willie quickened his stride, but the toe of Skeeter's spike track shoe scraped Slim Willie along the calf of his leg. One spike tore the skin and left blood in its wake. Slim Willie felt the tiny pain but he never missed a stride. He spurted ahead and swung over against the rail, leaving Skeeter a full stride behind. Slim Willie was sweating and the sweat rolled off him and down into his eyes. Half-blinded now, he kept his eyes on the rail and his fixed stare followed it. He felt choked and the choked feeling came from the bottom of his lungs and was raising. It seemed as if something inside was like a tissue paper bag slowly ripping after having been filled with fluid. The spilled fluid rose higher and higher. If he could only open his mouth wide and cough it up. But his teeth were clamped together and his thin lipped mouth was flattened over them like a tight seal. He was breathing through his nose and his breath was getting shorter and shorter because his nostrils were clogged.

Slim Willie's legs were tiring and his feet were heavy as if the spiked track shoes were made of lead, but he held his stride and kept his legs moving like pistons. He was running this race as if he were running it alone. Footracing against time and the time running out like quicksilver through an hour glass.

At the finish line there would be waiting a barrel of tar and a featherbed stuffed with chicken feathers. At the finishing line that Chicago dick in the derby hat would be waiting for him with a bench warrant.

But there would be Sport McAllister waiting there also. With a fistfull of hundred dollar bills. Tough little grizzled Sport from the wrong side of the tracks. The only man on earth who had ever believed in Slim Willie. The only man who had ever given Willard Slade a break. The only friend he had in the world. And Sport McAllister was waiting there for Slim Willie to win that footrace. And he wasn't going to fail the Sport.

He kept on. Kept on until he blinked the blindness out of his eyes and there stood Sport McAllister out on the race track at the finish line.

There was no cheering at all. There was only a sort of awful hush. Whatever cheering there was had died out.

Skeeter White ran far behind him, blowing and sweating. He ran with a limp. Because when Slim Willie had forged ahead in the race, and there was no hope of overtaking him, Skeeter had deliberately spiked himself in the wild hope of claiming foul.

So Slim Willie came down the home stretch alone, blood flowing from his nostrils, so that his white almost hairless torso was smeared with red. In a blind daze Slim Willie staggered across the finishing line and against the white tape stretched across the track. Sport McAllister caught him in his arms.

"I....won....Sport...."

Slim Willie unsealed his tight lips and opened his mouth. Blood spilled out and spewed all over Sport's new sweater.

"You won like a champ wins." Sport McAllister was sobbing like a kid. "A real Champ!"

Then he laid Slim Willie down on his bathrobe on the ground. And told somebody to get a stretcher and blankets.

Then Sport McAllister lifted his battered tear-wet face and snarled at the crowd on both sides.

"The Champ! That's a hell of a way to bring home a winner!"

THEN the crowd got what he meant. And hats were tossed in the air and the wild cheers broke loose like an explosion. And those who were yelling the loudest were the citizens from north of the tracks. And even the Three Links cowhands joined in the wild shouting.

There was a little hospital on the same north side of the tracks. Sport McAllister would have taken Willard Slade there.

"No—I'll go to my own cabin."

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Marvin Rawls and Sport McAllister were each at one end of the stretcher that carried Slim Willie home.

Sport had handed the key to the cabin to the sheriff.

"Mack Burkey's clutterin' up the floor. Git him out."

"Dead drunk?"

"Just dead."

Marvin Rawls grabbed Skeeter White by the scruff of the neck and kicked him in the middle of some lie he was telling that Slim Willie had spiked him.

"Git. You'd better git a long ways gone, Skeeter."

They carried Willard Slade into his cabin and laid him on his bunk, and when he had done coughing Sport wiped the blood and sweat away. His slate-gray eyes looked around until they located the Chicago detective. Willard Slade grinned faintly.

"What the hell!" The detective pushed back his derby, took a bench warrant from his pocket and tore it up. Then walked away.

When Slim Willie lay back on his bunk, Marvin Rawls stood outside. He opened the cabin door.

"Dave Stuart would like to see you, Slim Willie."

Slim Willie nodded. Dave Stuart came in awkwardly. He took off his hat as if there were a lady present. But it was only Death in there waiting.

Dave Stuart stood there beside the bunk. Willard Slade looked up at him without flinching. And Dave Stuart saw the dark shadow in the depth of his slate gray eyes.

"If I killed your brother Bud back in Chicago," said Slim Willie, "I sure never meant to ....I want you to know that.... A man don't lie when he's on his deathbed."

DAVE STUART nodded. He reached down and took Willard Slade's hand.

"Good luck, Slim Willie." Dave Stuart didn't know what else to say. He turned away from the bunk and went out the door and closed it softly behind him. Then Dave Stuart and Marvin Rawls walked slowly towards the Last Chance saloon.

When they were alone, Sport McAllister filled two shot glasses from his leather-covered hip flask.

"That motto on the wall—the only heritage from a convict father. Take it down and burn it. Burn it, Sport."

When the motto was ripped down and shoved into the stove and the blaze caught it and burned it to ashes, Willard Slade lay back with a smile on his gray face.

"Light a cigar, Sport—One of the cubebs —for me."

Then through the smoke, sounded Willard Slade's voice.

"There isn't much left to say, Sport. You understand—"

There was something in the slate gray eyes of the dying man. Sport McAllister seemed to read what was there, and he did the best he could with a prayer. When he came to "Amen," Willard Slade's voice echoed the word in the faintest whisper.

When Sport McAllister crossed himself and looked down into Willard Slade's gray face with the smile of eternal peace marked on it, Sport McAllister knew that the man was dead. He closed the door softly behind him, and went into the Last Chance Saloon.

Dave Stuart and Marvin Rawls and the Three Links outfit were lined up at the bar. But they weren't doing much talking. They looked at Sport McAllister as he shouldered in through the swinging half-doors.

"Them bets is all called off, boys." Sport said.

Their eyes questioned him. He nodded. He filled a shot glass.

"We all have our faults and shortcomings—the cards was marked against Slim Willie from the start. But whatever Willard Slade's faults were, he wiped 'em out. Slim Willie ran his last footrace against Death and broke the finish tape in a dead heat. We'll give him the biggest funeral ever held in Chinook. Slim Willie lost his race here on earth, but I can't help but feel that Up Yonder, the man, Willard Slade, crossed the finish line a winner!"

Sport McAllister lifted his shot glass.

"Drink to that boys! Then smash your likker glasses!"

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Seven Years Is a Long Time to Be Hiding Out in the Loneliest Place in North Australia

THE COMING OF JOE KILGOUR

By RUI CHESTOR

DESPITE the rich colors that, as day rose and fell, mantled the hills, you were always aware of isolation at Urrunboy. A stark solitary spirit pervaded the place, even when the hills flamed red and purple in the morning or glowed rose gold in the evening. But night saw this spirit pronounced when the hills, black against the sky, seemed to constrict the valley with the loneliness of an abandoned prison.

The bearded man, riding towards the hut in the middle of the valley, felt the depressing loneliness. No lonelier place in North Australia, he thought; not even excepting his own place miles to the north beyond the

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hills, where he prospected for gold and saw nobody from year's end to year's end save an occasional blackfellow.

There were cattle on Urrunboy, for it was the out-station of a huge run eastward towards Margrave Waters. But he saw none. They were back in the gaps in the ranges where the water-holes were. And crows were scavenging in the camp of the Urrunboy blacks and uttering dismal car-r-rks. The tribesmen were gone, and their lubras and piccaninnies. He wondered how Murch Levison was getting on without them.

He flung off the roan at the empty stockyards and hitched the animal to a post. Before going on to the hut, he stood for a time studying it. The sun was sinking between two peaks on the western wall, and a wide swathe of golden haze misted the valley. The hut was caught in the middle of its path. It was a brown structure of mud bricks and was partly surrounded by a clump of dull green desert oak. There was no sign of life, no smoke rising from the chimney; but it seemed, after he had stared a while, he could see Murch Levison just within the doorway, and Murch held a rifle.

He thought maybe he was mistaken, and he went towards the hut. He was tall and, despite the gray streaks in the brown beard, young; but he walked slowly and stiffly. He wore his slouch hat well back on his brown hair; his hazel eyes were sunken from heavy work, and his hands calloused by continuous use of pick and shovel. But his khaki drill shirt and trousers were clean; his boots, though dusty from travel, had been polished, and his hair and beard well brushed.

As his boots crunched on the gravel in front of the hut, Murch Levison appeared in the doorway, and the rifle *was* in his hands. He was lean, strong and burnt by the sun; but, from his unlaced boots to his uncombed hair, he was slovenly; unshaven face, narrow bony features, grimy flannel shirt, scaly neck, broken dirty fingernails, dark droop-lidded eyes that never smiled and were never still.

"Good day, Wulf," he said, and his voice had the rattle of dead palm leaves in a wind. His eyes went flickering past the visitor to scan the darkening hills. "I wasn't expectin' you. Haven't seen *you* for weeks."

Wulf Dawes thought, Murch is scared; the pale clammy tinge beneath the stubble, the wild leap of the eyes, the clutch of the hands on the rifle—all add up to fear. He said, "Why the rifle, Murch?"

"Thought—never mind what I thought," said Levison, and his eyes continued to traverse the hills and the valley. Suddenly he focused his glance on Dawes. "What are you after? Rations?"

Dawes nodded. "I'm out of flour, meat, salt. And I'm low in sugar and tea."

"Lucky for you they brought out a load from the homestead last week," said Levison. His voice became querulous. "Look, Wulf, this'll have to be the last time. I'm no storekeeper. Nex' time, you'll have to go into Margrave an' get it for yourself."

"I can still pay for what I eat," said Dawes, knowing the money he paid Levison never went into the homestead where it should have gone. He stroked his beard and studied Levison. "Can you spare a packhorse this time? If you can, I'll load up and be on my way before dark. I'll turn him loose when I get home. Any objections?"

LEVISON'S petulance was but momentary, and he nodded absently. "That's O.K., Wulf. He'll turn up a couple of days later, like he did before." The heavy lids lifted and the dark eyes fastened on Dawes. "See here, Wulf, have you got to get back straightaway?"

"Never like to be away longer than I can help," replied Dawes. "That's why it suits me to come here instead of packing rations out from Margrave. Why?"

Levison spoke eagerly. "What about puttin' in a few days with me, Wulf? I'm all on me own now the niggers've gone. An' it's pretty lonesome. You've got no real hurry to get back to the claim."

"Reckon I ought to get back at once, Murch."

"Aw, come," said Levison, his hand on Dawes' arm. "You don't *have* to, unless you've struck it rich out there. Have y'?"

"No."

"An' you never will. Not in Wigan Gully, you won't. Told you before you'll never find gold in Wigan. How long you been there, Wulf?"

"Eighteen months about."

"Eighteen months, an' all for nothin'. A

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few days doin' nothin' here with me won't hurt the tally. I been here seven years. Seven damned long years, all on me own, actin' nursemaid to a few steers, an' the place's gettin' on me nerves."

"All for nothing?" queried Dawes, his hand to his beard.

Levison's mouth twitched. He stared at Dawes. "Aw, come on, Wulf. Say you'll stay."

Dawes shook his head. "I don't like being away from the claim."

Levison's eagerness tautened to urgency. "Stay a night with me, then," he begged. "Just one night. That's not asking much. Come on, we'll go an' turn your roan into the yards, an' you can put the night in wth me. You can have the bunk an' I'll doss on the floor. . . . Wulf, there's a special reason why I want you to stay."

Dawes regarded Levison deliberately. "I'm not buying into trouble, Murch. Is it anything to do with the rifle?"

Levison hesitated. "I'll be straight, Wulf. I'm in a jam, an' I want somebody here with me. I'll tell you all about it later, but for God's sake, say you'll stay. I'm—I'm frightened, Wulf."

"All right," said Dawes after a moment's silence. "I'll stay. But only tonight, that's all."

"You're a sport," said Levison, and his breath trembled in a gusty sigh.

AS YOU stood in the doorway of the hut, looking in, you saw the wooden table in front of you, in the middle of the ant-bed floor. The open fireplace was set in the wall on your right, and, in the corner immediately at your left, was the pedal wireless set. Further along the left wall was Levison's bed, a camp stretcher, with his gear strewn untidily beneath it; beyond the stretcher, the hessian-curtained opening into the large closet ore storeroom where he kept his supplies. The window was in the end wall, opening on to the desert oaks. A big Coolgardie safe stood under the window where it caught any moving air. There was no ceiling and you looked up to the wide slabs that formed the roof. They were festooned with spiders' webs and speckled with the cocoons of insects. The roof was a happy hunting ground for geckos.

At night, the hut was a shadowy place, for the lamplight quickly lost its strength and was dissipated a few feet from its source. The shadows fluttered because of the moths and flying ants that swooped at the light. Levison did not like the shadows, and he did not like the open window and door. Outside, the sky had deepened from apple green to purple velvet jeweled with the Capricornian stars, and a breeze set the desert oak leaves pattering with a thin light sound.

They finished eating, and Dawes, sitting sideways to the table, lit his pipe and angled his glance at Levison. "What's it all about?" he asked.

Levison, who was sitting with elbows on the table and his head propped between his hands, started. He said, "There's a man called Joe Kilgour on the way out from Margrave. I got word yesterdee. Kilgour means trouble, Wulf."

"You got word? How?"

Levison pushed a thumb at the pedal wireless. "The police called me yesterdee mornin'. It was the sergeant—Jack Streyle."

Dawes let smoke drift from his nostrils. "I know Streyle. What did he say?"

Levison swallowed before replying. "He asked me if I knew a man called Kilgour—Joe Kilgour. I said yes, an' he said there'd been a man in town who said he was Joe Kilgour askin' about me. Been in Margrave for a week, talkin' about me an' gettin' directions to Urrunboy. Then Streyle said Kilgour'd left Margrave the mornin' before—three mornin's ago, Wulf—with two horses an' a rifle."

"The idea being he's making out this way?"

Levison shivered almost imperceptibly. "Where'd you think?" he retorted.

"Streyle say anything else?"

"He said Joe Kilgour had the jail look. He reckoned if I knew Kilgour I could say if he'd ever been sent up. An' I told him he's right. Kilgour got seven years for knifin' a man down in South Aus. An' that was seven years ago, so Kilgour must've just got out."

Dawes took his pipe from his mouth. "Number seven's cropped up a lot," he reflected. "You've been here seven years. Kilgour got seven years in jail. And apparently as soon as he's let out, he comes north and he's on his way out here." The pipe stem stabbed at Levison. "Why, Murch?"

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"I put him in jail," said Levison, and his fingers shook.

"You put him in jail!"

"I mean," amended Levison quickly, "it was my evidence that put him in. I had to tell the truth, Wulf. I saw what happened. An' now he's out."

Dawes struck a match and put it to his pipe. He eyed Levison over the flame. "Might as well tell the worst, Murch. What *are* you up against?"

"Wulf," and Levison moved restlessly, "I reckon Kilgour's out to get me. I been through hell since yesterdee mornin'. Wonderin' what to do. Where to go. Listen, Wulf. He could be out there now, watchin' through the window or the door. He could be linin' me up on the rifle—"

"Hold on, hold on," growled Dawes. "Don't panic. Why should he be out there? Why should he be anywhere within miles?"

"Wulf, he left Margrave the mornin' before yesterdee. He's had three full days."

"Margrave's a hundred and twenty miles away, Murch. A man would be hot and bothered to get here in three days."

"But I know Kilgour!" cried Levison. "I know what he's thinkin'. Been thinkin' for seven years. If you'd seen his eyes when I'd finished in the witness box, you'd know too. I had to do it. I couldn't get out of it, but he looked at me like death. He's after me, Wulf, an' he'd do the hundred an' twenty mile in three days easily."

"You may be right," said Dawes. "Yes, you may be right. And so you're expecting Joe Kilgour tonight. That's why you got me to stay. But you've had time to think out something, Murch."

"Time!" echoed Levison. "Hell! Streyle ought to have told me a week ago. I'd have known what to do. But he tells me when it's too late, when Kilgour's been gone twenty-four hours, an' the blacks gone two days. Damn Streyle for a fool!"

Dawes drew a mental picture of the police sergeant; a big vigorous man, graye-eyed, keen, intelligent. Streyle was no fool. There was a reason for everything he did, even to calling a man on the pedal wireless.

Levison was talking again, something about having received a warning, only he hadn't understood it.

"What's that?" demanded Dawes. "You had a warning?"

"The blacks," said Levison. "But I only laughed—"

YES, he'd laughed when old Yarcowie, the gray-thatched Urrunboy headman, had told him the tribe was moving out. Funny animals, the blacks.

"Blackfella go walkabout, boss," Yarcowie had said in difficult English. "Him fella debbil-debbil sit down longa Urrunboy. Blackfella him frighten, go away. Come back after debbil-debbil him sit down no more."

Levison had inquired into the nature of this devil whose presence was driving the tribe away, but could elicit no more than that the devil was immensely powerful and evil, and bent on causing a lot of trouble.

"You fella, you boss," Yarcowie had added, "you go walkabout, too. Him debbil-debbil him bad fella for you, boss. Debbil-debbil growl longa you. Make you dead fella sit down longa hole in ground quick fella you."

Yarcowie had displayed genuine concern for the boss as he passed on the warning. But Levison had grinned as he watched the tribe's departure; first the warriors carrying nothing but their weapons, then the lubras toiling along heavily burdened, and last of all the piccaninnies, capering lightheartedly. Two days later, Streyle had called him on the pedal wireless—

Dawes was puzzled by the story. It was as though the blacks could sniff danger. It was something he could not understand, and he finally decided it was coincidence only. The blacks would have gone walkabout, whether Joe Kilgour was coming or not.

Levison said, "If only they was here now, I'd laugh at Joe Kilgour. Yarcowie'd put a ring of boys around the place a snake couldn't pass. If only I had a dog! But all the dogs here belong to the blacks."

"And the blacks have gone and you've got no dog," said Dawes grimly.

Levison flung up his hands. "What am I to do? Tell me, Wulf, what *can* I do?"

Dawes did not speak immediately. From outside came the rustling of the desert oaks. Inside, there was the tapping of flying ants diving against the lamp, the fluttering of infatuated moths, the buzzing of a myriad midges. There was Levison's quick nervous

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wriggling; he couldn't sit still. Dawes scraped a moth out of his beard and spoke slowly. "You could do lots of things, Murch. You could run for the bush; you could light out for Margrave; you could hide out in the ranges; you could sit here and wait for Kilgour; or you could go out and start hunting for *him*. But there's one thing you ought to do: find out more about Kilgour; what he was doing; what he was saying; his general manner; and what he looked like, for seven years in jail's sure to change a man."

"Too late for that," snapped Levison edgily.

Dawes nodded sideways. "The pedal wireless, Murch. I'd have called Streyle back long ago. You might have the wrong slant on things altogether."

"I see no use in it," said Levison impatiently. "Kilgour's on the way. Might be here now. That's all that counts."

"But you never know," said Dawes.

Grubby lines of thought wrinkled Levison's forehead. "No," he said, "no good. A waste of time."

"Then I'll do it for you," said Dawes. "Bring the lamp over."

He placed his chair before the wireless, sat down, clamped a headset over his ears and put his feet on the pedals. Levison carried the lamp over and put it on top of the cabinet. The insects swung baffled over the table for a moment, then darted after the lamp. Dawes handed Levison the spare headset and started to pump. He flicked the switch over to transmission. "Urrunboy calling Margrave police. Urrunboy calling Margrave police. Come in, Margrave. . . ."

Almost at once there was a reply, a throaty voice crackling in the earphones. "Margrave police replying to Urrunboy. Where in hell have you been? We've been trying to raise you. That you, Murch? Over to you."

Dawes said, "Wulf Dawes speaking, but Murch is here. Is that Sergeant Streyle?"

"Constable Ball here. Who are you, Dawes, and what do you want?"

"I'm from Wigan Gully. Got a claim there. Sergeant Streyle called Murch yesterday about a man called Kilgour. We want to know more about Kilgour. Can you tell us anything we ought to know? Over to you."

The voice from Margrave crackled excitedly. "That's why we've been trying to raise you. This Kilgour bird is bad. Tell Murch to watch out for him. Tell him Streyle's on his way out as fast as he can drive the ute. And look, you, Dawes. Stick by Murch, will you? It's a damn good thing you're there. Got that? Over to you."

Dawes said slowly, "Yes, I've got it."

"All right, then. That's all I've got to say. I'm signing off. . . . Good luck. . . ."

DAWES stopped pedaling. He sat staring at his hands hanging between his knees. He said, "Murch, that wasn't so hot—" He became aware of an odd stillness and looked around. The spare headset dangled beside him, swaying gently. He ripped off his own headset and jumped up, kicking the chair back. "Murch! Murch! Where are you?"

He ran to the door, then stopped abruptly. A gritty whisper came to him. "For God's sake, Wulf, don't go outside!"

Dawes spun around, his eyes darting about the hut. The far end, under the window and by the Coolgardie safe, was dark, but Levison was not there.

"Wulf, I'm here."

Dawes got it then. He strode over to the hessian curtain and pulled it back. Levison was down on the floor of the store room, pressed back among bags of flour. "What the hell!" said Dawes.

"Wulf," said Levison in a low tense tone, "there's somebody outside. I heard footsteps. Slow footsteps, goin' round the hut."

"I heard nothing," said Dawes.

"I tell you," said Levison in a strangled voice, "I heard footsteps. Kilgour's out there."

"If he is, I'll get him," said Dawes. "Where's your rifle?"

He dropped the hessian. Levison heard him bumping past the table, heard the rasp of the rifle butt on the floor, the clump of heavy boots. He crept forward, inched the hessian back and stared out into the hut where the moths and ants still attacked the lamp on the wireless cabinet.

A minute later, Dawes was back in the hut.

"I saw nobody, Murch."

"Shut the door," shrilled Levison. "An' the window. There's a shutter for it be-

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hind the safe. A storm broke it off, but fix it in somehow."

Not till Dawes had effectively blocked the window did Levison emerge from the storeroom. He made sure the door was locked, resumed his seat at the table and slumped forward with his head on his arms. Dawes looked down at him and there was contempt in his eyes. He went over to the wireless, brought his chair back to the table and sat down.

His face hardened and he said, "Murch, this business stinks. Ball, the policeman, tells me to stick by you. I want to know what I've been let in for. You say Joe Kilgour got seven years for stabbing a man. You say it was your evidence that got him the seven years, and you say you've been up here for seven years in this God-forsaken hole. It looks, Murch, as if you came fifteen hundred miles to hide yourself."

Levison's face showed above his arms. "No, no, no. You've got it wrong, Wulf."

"That's the way it looks to me," said Dawes in a rough tone. "Perhaps Kilgour's got a reason to come out here?"

LEVISON straightened and stared fearfully at Dawes. "You're wrong, Wulf, you're wrong. I'll tell it you straight an' you can see for yourself."

"Spill it," said Dawes. He put a match to his pipe, and smoke weathed foglike through his beard. The hut was quiet, save for the insects fluttering around the lamp.

Levison took a deep breath and said, "I met this Joe Kilgour at Woodbridge. It's a little place down in South Aus, 'bout a hundred miles north of Adelaide. A dead quiet farmin' place where nothin' happened but a lot of excitement over the price o' lambs an' wool an' wheat. One of them places that look like deserted hell in summer, all yellow an' dry, an' like an almanac picture in winter an 'spring when everythin's green."

"I know," said Dawes. "There's dozens of little towns like that down there. I've been through that country."

"Me," went on Levison with his eyes fixed on the chimney behind Dawes, "I went to Woodbridge 'bout nine year ago. Clerk in a land agent's office. I was only a lad, twenty-one, an' keen to get on. An' I had a good chance, too, for there was business in Woodbridge.

"Joe Kilgour, he was me own age. Son of the leadin' farmer, plenty of cash, been to college, an' got brains. A tall stringy feller who'd probably fill out an' make a big man.

"His ol' man was that way. He was a good-lookin' boy, Joe Kilgour, an' his father an' mother swore by him, for he was the only child. Our Joe, they called him. The pride of Woodbridge, too, in a way, for he played football an' tennis an 'cricket, an' the girls liked him pretty much. Me, I'm that way in Woodbridge meself. Though, hell, look at me now an' you wouldn't believe it, would y', Wulf?"

Dawes shot him a sardonic glance. "I'd believe it, Murch. Go on."

Levison released a sigh. "Yair, I wasn't bad then, an' me an' Joe Kilgour, we knocked around together. There was a girl in Woodbridge called Nancy Provan. An', if you saw her, Wulf, you'd forget all the women you ever seen. I've not forgot her. Here, I'll show you somethin'."

He left his chair and fumbled in a kitbag under his bed. He returned and put a postcard-size photograph on the table. It was the tinted picture of a dark-eyed girl with dark hair parted in the middle and drawn back to a roll on the nape of the neck. There was vivid life in the eyes, beautiful strength in the nose and chin, and the allure of Helen in the smiling lips.

"Not bad," said Dawes, studying the face. "Not at all bad." He dropped the picture on the table.

"Not bad!" echoed Levison. "God! If you'd have seen her, you'd have been mad like the rest of us. Her father was the town lawyer. She was eighteen year ol' an' she had the boys on a short string. There were three of us fair torn open by Nancy Provan; Joe Kilgour, me—Murch Levison—an' Barry Nelson. The talk was Joe stood ace high, an' I guess it was right, though her ol' man wouldn't stand for a formal engagement, reckonin' she was too young. So I never give up hope, see?

"Nothin' ever happened in Woodbridge save the usual round o' work an' games an' socials an' church. Sometimes a birth or a death. All right in its way, but a bit hard on young fellers; lads with hot blood an' high spirits. Just out of town, there was a farm run by Silas Werner an' his wife. Nice

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quiet folk on the surface, but, if you're in the know—phwee-oo!

"They had a big house with a lot o' rooms. At night, if you're one of the mob, you could go to Werners an' let yourself go. There was plenty o' liquor. An' you could get a gamble; poker, swye, the horses, an' even baccarat. An' there were girls, too; easy-mannered girls, friends of the family or relations up from the city for a holiday. That was the yarn. Yair, Werner's was a sweet set-up. But it was kept well under the lap. None of the God-fearin' citizens knew anythin' about Werner's. It was kept a close secret among the lads.

"I was there several times. Not often, because I didn't hold the money it took. A night at Werner's could be damned expensive. But Barry Nelson was there often. He was flash an' he had money. He was a sheepman an' five or six years older'n me an' Joe Kilgour. He had a nasty savage tongue, Nelson, 'specially when he'd been drinkin'. I didn't like him an' Joe Kilgour didn't like him. Joe, y' know, never went near Werner's—"

Levison's voice died away and his body jerked. His eyes went around the hut as though he were seeing it for the first time, and fear rode him. He said, "God! This is damnable."

"Go on," said Dawes again. "Something happened at this Werner place? You were going to tell me."

"Yair," said Levison wearily. Something happened at Werner's all right. Joe Kilgour stuck a knife into Barry Nelson. Wulf, it was a Saturdee night. Joe Kilgour came to me where I lived an' he looked bad. He said, 'We'll make Werner's tonight, Murch. I feel like hell.' I stared at him thunderstruck. That was a place he never went near. Then it came out he'd had a tearin' row with Nancy. Just over a little thing, too. He'd seen her drivin' along the street that mornin' in Nelson's car. Barry'd given her a lift home or somethin'. There was nothin' to it, but Joe didn't like Nelson, an' one thing led to another, an' in the end there's a fearful bust-up between Joe an' Nancy. An' now, Joe was huntin' trouble.

"I don't mind admittin', Wulf, I wasn't unhappy about it, for with Joe out o' the way, there'd be a chance for me with Nancy.

Anyway we went to Werner's. There was the usual Saturdee night mob. Nelson was there an' he'd been drinkin'. Joe Kilgour set out to catch up to him an' it didn't take him long. Me, I got stuck into the grog, too.

"Some time near midnight, I find meself with Joe Kilgour an' Nelson an' a lot of whiskey in a room by ourselves. We're playin' poker in a bamboozled sort o' way, none of us bein' too bright, save Nelson perhaps. Joe was pretty muzzy an' Nelson begun to chiack him. Get the set-up, Wulf. Three kids, fuddled, wobblin' into oblivion, hot with liquor—two of 'em, at any rate, an' Nelson's dirty tongue in action. Bein' ready to pass out, Joe Kilgour wasn't takin' much notice till Nelson started spoutin' poison about Nancy Provan.

"Joe's face went white. Then he came across the table like a wildcat an' Nelson's down on the floor with Joe's clasp knife in his neck an' he's bleedin' like a pig. Wulf, it was all so quick I couldn't do nothin'. An' then the crowd burst in on us, an' there's all hell to pay."

LEVISON paused. There were beads of sweat on his face. Then he went on and his voice seemed dead. "The lid blew so high it never come down. Woodbridge stank. After Joe's trial a lot o' people left in a hurry."

"Including yourself," said Dawes, and Levison flinched. "What about Kilgour?"

"Wulf, I fought for him. I perjured meself for him. I swore Nelson provoked him to a frenzy. I said Joe was out of his mind with drink an' fury an' didn't know what he was doin'. More, I said Nelson had attacked him first an' he acted in self-defense. So help me, Wulf, he'd've got the rope but for me. But what I said brought the verdict down to manslaughter, an' he got seven years."

Dawes' pipe had long gone out, but he still gripped it between his teeth. "Yes," he said, "but why come up here?"

Levison pressed his hands to his temples. "I was finished in Woodbridge. Nancy would have nothin' to do with me. I wanted to crawl away an' hide. An' that's what I did."

"Seems Kilgour found out where you hid quick enough," said Dawes.

Levison said nothing. Despite the locked door and the blocked window, the sound of

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the rustling leaves seeped into the hut. The wind had risen.

"Look, Murch," said Dawes. "You still haven't explained why—"

He cut off dead. A moth had blundered down the lamp chimney and dropped across the wick. The flame shrank to a diseased tortile blue outline, reducing the illumination to an eerie gloom. They could see each other as vague blurs. And, in that moment, the window shutter fell inward, clattered over the top of the Coolgardie safe and slammed down onto the floor.

Levison choked a scream down in his throat. His lips were dry. "My God! He's there, Wulf."

"If he is, I'll have him," said Dawes. He seized the rifle again and made for the door. He banged it behind him and the vibration disturbed the dead moth and it slipped off the wick and the flame sprang up, clear and amber again.

With the blank window staring at him, Levison felt horribly naked. Fear paralyzed him. He wanted to run to the window and replace the shutter; he wanted to lock the door; but he could not make up his mind to do either. He sat helpless, torn by indecision and fear, and his skin crawled. He couldn't move till the door rattled open and Dawes came in again.

"I saw no one, Murch."

Levison shrilled, "Shut the door! Lock it!"

"All right, all right." Dawes' free hand fumbled with the lock. He held the rifle in the other.

"The window, too, Wulf."

"Damn the window!" said Dawes, and, at the look of him, Levison suddenly got up from the chair and started to back away. Dawes went round the table after him. He said, "Murch, I want the truth. Why *is* Joe Kilgour coming here?"

"I told you," said Levison wildly. "He thinks I put him away. Instead, I saved him from the rope."

"The truth!" shouted Dawes, and his beard lowered menacingly.

"I told you, Wulf."

"You're a liar! Tell me the truth, or I'll —I'll hand you over to Joe Kilgour!"

Levison retreated till he was backed hard into the corner beyond the storeroom opening. Dawes followed him, and his hands came up. "Don't, Wulf, don't."

"The truth, Murch! The truth!"

Levison's knees slowly sagged and he went down till he was groveling on the floor. He looked up into the muzzle of the rifle and he saw Dawes' big hand thumbing back the bolt.

"I'll tell you," he screamed. "I'll tell you straight. I—I stabbed Barry Nelson!"

"Ah!" said Dawes. "So that's it!"

The final barrier of reserve broken, Levison babbled on feverishly. "I stabbed Nelson with Joe Kilgour's knife. It was easy to get from him, he was so drunk. All he knew was he'd been found with Nelson dyin' and the knife in his hand."

"Why?" said Dawes stonily.

"Nancy Provan," said Levison with a whimpering sound.

The tension went out of Dawes and he lowered the rifle. Behind him, the door swung in silently and a big man stepped into the hut. Levison's face was white.

"Did you get it?" asked Dawes.

"Every word," said Sergeant Streyle. He came over and stared contemptuously down at Levison. "Yes, your idea worked, though I thought it wouldn't. You got through to Ball on time?"

"Yes." Dawes pondered. "But I'm puzzled about the blacks. I didn't think *that* up."

"That was my idea," said Streyle. "A white man's whisper of a debbil-debbil is as good as their own. Kilgour, you'll go back to find the slate wiped clean. The old trial will be struck out and everything expunged."

"Kilgour!" Levison's voice ran up a crescendo of terror. "You!"

"Yes, Kilgour," said Streyle. "Joe Kilgour got eighteen months remission of sentence for good behavior. But even five and a half years of penal servitude makes a difference to a man, Levison." He turned away with a gesture of repugnancy. "Joe, I believed you when you told me your story. Still, policemen don't take things on trust. I checked up on you down at Woodbridge. There's a girl down there," and he picked up the picture from the table and looked at it. "A nice girl, Joe. She's still waiting. She told me to tell you that—"

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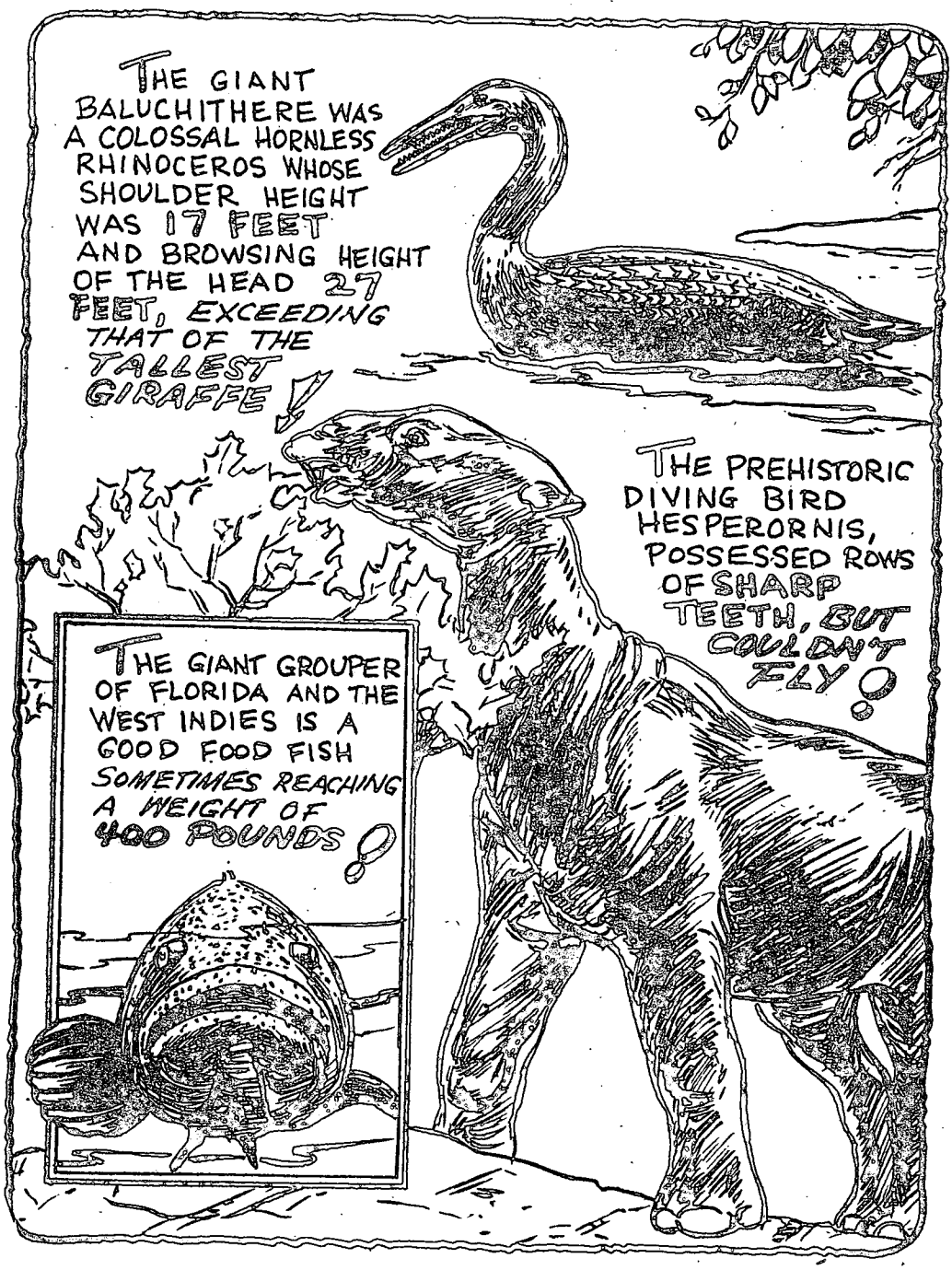
Curiosities By Weill


THE GIANT BALUCHITHERE WAS A COLOSSAL HORNLESS RHINOCEROS WHOSE SHOULDER HEIGHT WAS 17 FEET AND BROWSING HEIGHT OF THE HEAD 27 FEET, EXCEEDING THAT OF THE TALLEST GIRAFFE!
THE PREHISTORIC DIVING BIRD HESPERORNIS, POSSESSED ROWS OF SHARP TEETH, BUT COULDN'T FLY!
THE GIANT GROUPER OF FLORIDA AND THE WEST INDIES IS A GOOD FOOD FISH SOMETIMES REACHING A WEIGHT OF 400 POUNDS!

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THE LEATHER DUKE

There Was One Theory About Johnny Fletcher Being a Detective—If He Did Catch the Murderer, He'd Talk Him to Death

Part III

THE STORY SO FAR

JOHNNY FLETCHER and Sam Cragg have come to desperate straits—their book supply has dried up, so they have no copies to sell of "Every Man A Samson," and they are forced to heed a "Man Wanted" sign and go to work.

Their labors are in a leather factory which is owned by Harry Towner, known as the Leather Duke. Harry's son Elliott is working there to learn the business, and Johnny Fletcher—who always hangs around where money is—tries to cultivate Elliott's acquaintance. Then one of the factory workmen, Al Piper, is found dead, and Johnny is full of theories of foul play. He trails Harry Towner to his club—he and Sam badly needed a dinner—and actually sells Towner on the idea that he's an undercover man with theories about the Black Hand having been mixed up in the factory mur-

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By

FRANK GRUBER

Author of "The Jungle Shawl" and other Johnny Fletcher Mystery Books and Radio Adventures

der. Next Johnny accomplishes a difficult selling job that Towner puts up to him, and the result is that he gets a job he wants—that of factory detective.

Another result of Johnny's technique is that Linda Towner, Harry's daughter, invites him to lunch, and offers him a lift in her car. She is inclined to be skeptical of Johnny as a detective, but he suddenly tells her that they are being trailed by a black Chevrolet.

XII

TEN minutes later Johnny and Linda Towner got out on Wabash, turning the yellow Cadillac over to the doorman of the Fluttering Duck. The black Chevrolet was double-parked a short distance away.

They entered the restaurant and the headwaiter immediately escorted them to a good table.

"I'll have a dry Martini," Linda said, as they were seated.

"Beer for me," said Johnny.

"Beer!"

He grinned. "I'm a working man. By the way, are you sure you didn't have a lunch date today with Freddie?"

"Why, no. And if you don't mind I'd just as soon not talk about him."

"Well," said Johnny, "we don't have to talk about him, but I'm afraid you're going to have to talk *to* him, because here he is."

Fred Wendland, his hair nicely pomaded, was bearing down on them. His face had a sullen, unhappy expression.

"Linda," he said, "I thought I might run into you here."

"Oh, did you?" Linda asked coolly.

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Wendland pulled out a chair. "D'you mind?"

"Yes," said Johnny.

Wendland had not even looked at Johnny so far and if he heard him he gave no sign. He sat down. "I called your home and the butler told me you'd gone into town with your father. It's about tomorrow night, the fraternity's asked the alumni to a housewarming, for the new house and I thought—"

"Which team are you on?" Johnny asked. "Fraternity or Alumni?"

Wendland turned deliberately and looked at and through Johnny. "Oh, hello, Fancher, isn't it?"

"Fletcher."

"Ah yes, Fletcher. From the tannery, aren't you?"

"The factory, son. And ten'll get you twenty that you get sore before I do."

"I'm afraid I don't follow you."

"For example, what business are you going into after you get out of school?"

"Stop it, Johnny," said Linda. "Fred's been out eight or nine years."

"But he was just talking about his fraternity house."

"He's an alumnus and you know it very well. Let's have a more or less peaceful lunch, shall we? I'm hungry."

"You order for me," Johnny said, "I want to have a little chat with the man from the black Chevvie."

"He's come in?"

"Little table, just inside the door."

Johnny got up and crossed the room. He pulled out a chair opposite the individual who had followed them to the Fluttering Duck. He was a rather insignificant looking man of indeterminate age, but probably in his late thirties.

"Mr. Smith, I believe," Johnny said.

"I beg your pardon!"

"Aren't you John Smith of Keokuk, Iowa?"

The man shook his head. "You've made a mistake."

"Oh, I dont think so," said Johnny easily. "Let me see, you drive a black Chevrolet coupe, License 7 S 57-08. My name is Johnny Fletcher, I work for the Towner Leather Company, and the young lady with me is the boss' daughter, Linda. The fellow with the shiny hair who just broke in on us is Freddie Wendland, her fiance. Next question?"

"If you don't mind," the insignificant-looking man said, "I don't know what you're talking about. I just stopped in here to have my lunch."

"Who put you on my tail?"

"Tail? I don't think—"

"You don't think you know what I'm talking about. Never heard of Al Piper either, did you?"

"Wasn't a man by that name, ah, murdered yesterday?"

"Right!" cried Johnny. "And for that you win the jackpot, and the mink coat, and the furnished house and lot and the table model electric refrigerator, plus a ten year's supply of Royal Snus snuff. Would you like to try now for the $64.00?"

"Got a big mouth, haven't you?" the man across the table asked, "and I see somebody bopped you one recently."

"Last night, on Oak near Milton. Didn't happen to see it?"

"No, but if you play a return engagement, let me know and I'll make it a point to be there."

"Oh, you'll be there, all right. That's your job, isnt it? To follow me."

"You're doing all the talking."

"You've done a little yourself."

The man signalled a waiter. When the latter came over, he said, "I'd like a bacon and tomato sandwich on toast. Plenty of mayonnaise."

"Mayonnaise," said Johnny in disgust, and getting up returned to his own table.

AS Johnny seated himself, Linda leaned eagerly across the table. "What did you find out?"

"I found out that he isn't as smart as he thinks he is," Johnny said, grimly. He reached into his pocket and brought out his four hundreds and two fifties. He peeled off one of the fifties and caught the eye of their waiter who was hovering nearby.

"Could you get me change for this?" Johnny asked. "Say four tens and a couple of fives."

"Yes, sir!"

"Oh—and by the way, your doorman checked in a black Chevrolet coupe a few

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minutes ago. License 7 S 57-08. Could you get me the name and address of the owner?"

"Why, yes, I believe I could," said the waiter. He moved off swiftly with the fifty dollar bill.

Johnny looked brightly at Linda. "Now, where were we?"

"You and Freddie were exchanging insults," said Linda, "but we decided to stop that and listen to you make like a detective."

"That's right," said Johnny. "The first thing a good detective does is to check on the alibis of all persons connected with the crime. Let's begin with you, Linda. Where were you yesterday morning?"

Linda started to laugh, then realizing that Johnny was regarding her seriously, she sobered. "Now, surely, you don't think *I* had any connection with that?"

"It's your father's factory."

"You mean you also suspect Dad?"

"Everyone connected with the plant is a suspect, five hundred people, more or less. There's only one of them I don't suspect —myself."

"But that policeman suspects you quite strongly."

"True. But *I* know I didn't do it, so I can eliminate myself."

"And you can eliminate me. I wasn't anywhere near the factory yesterday."

"Check!" Johnny shifted to Wendland. "And you?"

Wendland drew back. "Are you insane, man?" he gasped. "This—this man who was killed was a common laborer."

"So?"

"I'm afraid I don't move in such circles."

Johnny's eyes smoldered as he studied Wendland. "That's a very good idea, Mr. Wendland. Associate with working people and you might pick up their habits, such as going to work yourself."

"What he means, Freddie darling," put in Linda, "is that you're a stuffed shirt and a snob. Or to put it more succinctly, a stinker."

"You took the words right out of my mouth," said Johnny.

Fred Wendland pushed back his chair and got to his feet. "Very well, Linda, if you're going to side with him."

"Run along, Freddie."

"I'll phone you tonight."

"Do that. Perhaps I'll be home."

Wendland bowed to Linda, gave Johnny a frigid look and walked off.

"You know," said Johnny, "I don't think Freddie likes me."

THE waiter moved up to the table. "Here's your change, sir," he said unctuously, counting out the bills one by one, four tens, two fives. "The party didn't have an ownership card in the car, but the manager has a book in his office which gives the name and address of every car owner in the state."

"And?"

"The black Chevrolet, License 7 S 57-08 is registered in the name of Wiggins Detective Agency."

"I'll be damned," exclaimed Johnny.

The waiter coughed gently. "Your change, sir—four tens and, ah, two fives."

"Ah, yes, thank you." Johnny picked up the bills, riffled them together and stowed them into his pocket. The waiter groaned and went off.

"He'll probably put his thumb in the soup," Johnny said, "so I think we'd better skip that course. Wiggins Detective Agency—now, who the devil would be hiring a detective agency?

"Why don't you ask the man?"

"Linda," said Johnny, "you ought to be a detective yourself. Excuse me a minute."

He got up and crossed the room. The insignificant-looking private detective was taking a bite of his bacon and tomato sandwich when Johnny came up. He stopped halfway through the bite, with the sandwich in his mouth.

"Who's paying the Wiggins Agency to have me shadowed?" Johnny demanded.

Mayonnaise dripped through the fingers of the private detective. He became aware of it after a moment and removed the sandwich from his mouth. He picked up his napkin and wiped the mayonnaise from his fingers.

"Sorry. Never heard of the Wiggins Agency."

"Your car's registered in the Wiggins Agency's name."

"How did you—" The detective caught himself, scowled at Johnny. "Beat it, fella, you're spoiling my lunch."

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"I hope so. Anybody who'd eat mayonnaise—" Johnny shrugged and walked back to his table. The waiter was putting out the food, setting down the plates with a little more than necessary annoyance.

"He won't talk," said Johnny, "but I've got him worried."

"*You're* not worried?'

"Why should I be?'

"Apparently someone suspects you so strongly that they're paying money to a private detective agency to have you shadowed."

"Of course," said Johnny, "we don't know for sure that *I'm* the one who's being shadowed."

Linda inhaled sharply. "You think—me?"

"Have you been behaving yourself lately?"

Linda looked thoughtfully at Johnny. "You're not really joking. You think I—"

"No."

"You do!"

JOHNNY sighed lightly. "At this stage of the game, I suspect everybody. You say you weren't at the plant yesterday, but your father owns the place, your brother works there and you've probably been in and out of it a thousand times. You may or may not be aware of people in the factory. Let's say you're not, but there isn't one of those five hundred odd workers, male and female, who doesn't know about you. It's an old company. I know of two employees who have been with the company for thirty-nine years. They know the day you were born; you may never have talked to them, but they know you and everything about you."

"But I don't see how that could involve me in a brutal murder."

"You know about your father being called The Duke?"

She nodded. "Yes. The newspapers have always called him The Leather Duke."

"And the employees, in talking about him, refer to him as The Duke. They speak of you as The Duchess. The Towner Leather Company is an island in the city, an independent principality. The workers are its citizens. Some of them love the rulers, some of them hate them. But *all* fear them."

"Why should they fear us?"

"Everybody fears his employer. Any workman can be fired, lose his security. A word of praise for one of the rulers, or a word of hate, can be resented by another employee. The reason for a quarrel does not determine the degree of hate that is engendered. A blow is struck—" Johnny shrugged.

"You make it sound very devious," Linda said soberly.

"The reasons for murder are usually devious. You take Al Piper; from all I've heard about him he was a pretty decent sort, a married man with two children. A pretty steady worker, as witness his long employment at the Towner factory. He had only one really bad habit; he was a periodic drinker. Twice a year he went on binges."

"But you don't know what he did during those drinking periods? I understand he had just come off one a couple of days ago."

"True, but I want to call attention to the fact that he wasn't killed while he was on one of those binges. It was only after he had sobered up and returned to work. I think therefore that his death can be traced to something that happened at the plant. It points the finger at a Towner man—or woman."

"Of whom there are five hundred."

"My job is to eliminate and keep on eliminating until only one person is left—the murderer."

XIII

THE man from the Wiggins Detective Agency followed Johnny and Linda Towner back to the leather factory.

"Now," Johnny said, "we'll see whether he's following you or me. I'll go in and you drive off."

"But I wanted to see Dad," protested Linda.

"He won't be back yet from his directors' meeting," said Johnny, "and me, I've got to get to work."

Linda hesitated, then nodded agreement. "All right, I'll see you later."

She stayed in her car and Johnny went into the plant. He stopped inside the door, however, and peered out through the glass. Linda started up the Cadillac convertible and drove off.

The man in the black Chevrolet continued

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to loll back in his seat. Johnny nodded thoughtfully. "Well, that settles that. He's watching me."

He climbed up to the office floor and was so wrapped in thought that he did not see Nancy Miller. She started to speak to him, then thought better of the idea. Johnny rang for the elevator, then saw Nancy.

He hurried back to her. "Eight o'clock this evening," he said.

"Eight o'clock, what?"

"That's when I'll pick you up. Oh, I haven't got your address."

"Aren't you taking a lot for granted?" Nancy Miller asked, coolly.

"Why no, you said you'd go out with me if I weren't a laborer and I'm no longer toiling with my hands."

"Then why're you going upstairs?"

"I'll tell you about that this evening. Here's the elevator. The address—?"

She hesitated, then suddenly smiled. "635 Armitage."

"Eight o'clock—your best dress!"

He stepped into the elevator and rode up to the counter floor. He walked through to the sorting department and noted that it was ten minutes after two.

Hal Johnson was leaning against his desk. He looked up at the clock and then at Johnny.

"Hiyah, Hal," Johnny greeted him cheerfully.

Johnson grunted. "Go out to lunch with Mr. Towner?" he asked, sarcastically.

"No, his daughter."

Johnson blinked. "All right," he said, "I'm only the foreman here. Maybe I'm not supposed to know what's going on. I hired you for a counter sorter yesterday, and today the boss calls you down to his office and you have lunch with his daughter."

"The office send up the John B. Croft order yet?"

"What Croft order?"

"The one I got just before lunch. Twenty barrels."

"*You* got an order for counters from the Croft Shoe Company?"

"Yes, Mr. Towner wanted to find out if I was a good salesman." Johnny shrugged. "So I ran over and got the order."

Johnson groaned. "Now, I've heard everything."

Johnny leaned toward the counter foreman. "Harry offered me the sales manager's job."

"Oh, no!" cried Johnson.

"Don't worry, Hal," Johnny said easily, "I turned it down."

Johnson looked at Johnny a moment, then swallowed hard.

"Just a minute," he said thickly.

He left Johnny at the head of the sorting benches and strode down the line to where Elliott Towner was working at his bench. Johnny saw Johnson ask young Towner a question. He didn't hear Elliott's reply, but saw Johnson stagger as if struck by an invisible fist. Towner, however, continued to talk and Johnson listened intently for a moment or two. Then he bobbed his head and came back toward Johnny.

AS THE foreman approached Johnny saw that his face was filmed with perspiration. "I'm fifty-two years old," Johnson said when he came up. "I've worked for this company since I was thirteen—thirty-nine years. I've seen a lot of men come and go here, Fletcher. I've hired thousands of men and I've fired a few hundred. But, so help me, I've never had a man here like you." He cleared his throat. "And *I* hired you!"

"You almost didn't," said Johnny. "Sam Cragg was your first choice. By the way, where is Sam?"

"Piling up barrels," said Johnson. "Without Joe Genara—and without the elevator. Now, don't tell me you're going to pull him off that job."

"How could *I* pull him off?" asked Johnny, innocently. "You're the foreman."

"I am?"

"Of course."

"I thought you were taking over!"

"Me? Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Elliott said that you—"

"Shh," said Johnny. "I'm going to snoop around here, that's all. A little undercover work, until I smoke out the man who killed Al Piper. But don't pay any attention to me. I won't interfere with the work."

"Will the work interfere with you?"

Johnny chuckled. "If I don't have to do any of it."

About eight pairs of eyes down the line of benches were watching Johnny and the

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foreman, while the owners were pretending to be sorting counters.

Johnny clapped Johnson on the shoulder and at least six audible gasps went up along the benches. Johnny left the foreman at his high bookkeeper's desk and headed for an aisle between two rows of barrels. He reached the wash basins at the rear, stopped to listen and heard the thump of a barrel on concrete. He headed to the left and saw Sam lifting a barrel of counters over his head.

"Johnny!" Sam cried. "I was just thinkin' that you ran out on me."

He eased the barrel on top of a stack of three, then turned happily to Johnny. "Where'd you get the two bucks you left for me? I sure had a swell lunch and I still got ninety cents."

"I've got about four-ninety, myself," said Johnny. "Four hundred and ninety." He took the bills from his pocket and exhibited them to Sam.

Sam gasped. "Johnny, you didn't rob—?"

"Now, Sam, you know I wouldn't do a thing like that. Mr. Towner gave me the money—an advance."

"You conned him out of it?" Then Sam grimaced. "It'll take us about a year to earn that, Johnny." Sam's voice rose in agony. "You ain't gonna make us work here that long, are you?"

"You can ease off now, Sam. We're back in the chips."

"And we're quittin'?"

"Well, not exactly." Johnny coughed gently. "I sold Mr. Towner on the idea of letting me find the murderer of Al Piper.'

"No, Johnny, you didn't!"

"I'm afraid I did."

"But you promised me you wouldn't do any more detective stuff."

"I made no such promise, Sam. As a matter of fact, we were already working on the job. Only we were doing it for nothing. Now, we're doing it for pay."

"But that cop was up here again this morning, Johnny. He was askin' all sorts of questions. About you—and me."

"I know. He tried a little joust with me just before lunch. He came off second-best."

"Maybe, Johnny, maybe. But don't forget they got rooms down at Headquarters where they make you sit under a big white light and ask you a lot of questions with rubber hoses and things. We wouldn't come out so good on that, would we?"

"That isn't going to happen to us, Sam. I'm way ahead of Lieutenant Lindstrom right now. While he's making up his mind, I'll grab the murderer."

"Now?"

"Well, no. I don't know who he is."

"You got any idea, yet?"

"Uh-uh. Let's see, it was over in the next aisle you found him. Let's take a look."

"Do we have to?"

"Cut it out, Sam. The man's dead. His body was taken away yesterday morning."

Sam frowned, but followed Johnny reluctantly into the next aisle. "Now, let's go at this scientifically," Johnny said. "There are ten stacks of barrels on each side—"

"Only nine on the right side," Sam said. "The empty place is where, ah, Al Piper was—"

"That's right."

Johnny walked into the aisle. "Four stacks of barrels, then this empty spot, then five stacks—mmm." Johnny stepped past the empty spot in the row of barrels where the body of Piper had been found and continued on to the end of the aisle.

A rack had been built here, running the entire length of the counter sorting department. Partly filled barrels were piled on the rack and under it, more or less screening the sorting department from the stacks. But by stooping, Johnny could see under the rack and over the top of the barrels set on the floor, into the sorting department.

Johnny put his eye to the shaft. He found himself watching the back of the nearest counter sorter—Elliott Towner. He looked thoughtfully at the back of the Leather Duke's son, for a long moment, then shifted his glance to the next bench. It was vacant, Sam Cragg's place. Beyond it, on the left, Joe Genara was working and to the left of him two men with whom Johnny had not yet gotten acquainted. Past them was Cliff Goff, the horse player. Then came Johnny's bench and, finally, at the very end, next to Johnson's desk, the bench of old Axel Swenson.

As Johnny looked, Karl Kessler, the assistant foreman came walking into the sorting department. He said a word or two to

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Swenson, then stopped at Johnny's bench and began idly re-sorting some of the bunches of counters Johnny had piled up early that morning.

Sam moved up behind Johnny and bent down. "What're you looking at, Johnny?" he whispered.

"Men at work," replied Johnny.

"Gee," Sam exclaimed suddenly. "Maybe the murderer was watchin' *us* workin' yesterday morning." He shivered. "Gives you a funny feeling."

"What I can't figure out," said Johnny, "is why Al Piper came back here in the first place. He ran a skiving machine, which is out in the main room."

"Maybe he came back here to meet, uh, whoever it was who killed him."

"Which meant that he knew the man."

"Yeah, sure."

"But why couldn't he talk to him out in the open?"

"You asking me, Johnny, or yourself?"

"Myself, I guess."

Johnny sighed and rose to his full length. "What time did you come back here to help Joe with the barrels yesterday, Sam?"

"I didn't look at the clock, Johnny, but I guess it was about a half hour after we started to work."

"That would have been around ten o'clock, and it was an hour or so before you found him here. But he'd been dead for an hour or two hours then. In other words, he could have been killed as early as nine o'clock."

"At that time we weren't even working here yet."

"Cut it out, Sam," exclaimed Johnny. "*We* know we didn't kill him."

"That's right," exclaimed Sam. "We know that."

"And one other person knows we didn't do it—the murderer."

Sam looked about uneasily. "You know, Johnny, I don't like working here. I keep thinking somebody's watching me. It's too dark and too many places to hide. A guy could throw a knife at you before you knew it."

Johnny snapped his fingers. "Sam, you've done it!"

"What've I done?"

"Given me my first clue. The knife."

"But the copper said it was *your* knife!"

"*I* know it wasn't my knife, Sam. Think back—when you found Al Piper and we were all nosing around here, there was no sign of any knife. It wasn't until later that Lindstrom found my knife, back here. Planted. Yet Piper was killed with a knife."

"Yeah, sure, but I don't get your point. The guy who done it didn't want to leave his knife laying here, because it could be traced to him."

"Right, Sam—to a certain point. There are a lot of knives around here; every counter sorter has one. But if it was stolen from one of the benches it would be missed in a matter of minutes, because the sorters are always using their knives to trim leather. For the same reason, the sorters—if one of them was the murderer—couldn't use his own knife to do the job. He couldn't be sure he'd have time enough to really wash the knife thoroughly, without being seen. Those leather knives are eight inches long, sharp as razors and with long points. You can't fold them so you can't carry them around in your pocket." Johnny drew a deep breath. "So it's my idea that the murderer didn't use a leather knife at all. He used a folding pocket-knife, which he could put into his pocket without washing. Then he got to worrying about that, was afraid there might be a search and blood found on his clothes, so he stole one of the knives from the bench and dumped it here."

"And he just picked your knife by accident?"

"Maybe," said Johnny. "And maybe not. I was a new man on the job. The police would waste a lot of time trying to ferret out the history of a man nobody around here knew anything about."

"The cops couldn't find out much about us, the way we've always moved around," Sam said. "Of course, if they took our fingerprints—"

"Speaking of fingerprints, I wonder if Lieutenant Lindstrom went over that knife of mine that was planted here. I guess I'll never know the answer to that because Lindstrom isn't in much of a cooperating mood. Anything we learn we've got to dig up ourselves. And I guess we might as well get started."

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"How?"

"Go back to your bench and talk—talk to everyone you can. If they get sore, fine; people spill things when they're mad. Talk about the murder."

"What about work?"

"Keep on working. At least enough to make it look good."

XIV

THEY started out of the aisle, went to the one that cut through to the counter sorting department. As they came through, they ran into Karl Kessler, about to go into the aisle.

"Hey," exclaimed Kessler, "you two guys are the biggest stallers in the place." He nodded to Sam. "You finish piling up the barrels?"

"Uh-uh," replied Sam.

"Then get busy."

"Sam's going to sort counters a while," said Johnny easily. "He's tired lifting up barrels."

"Tired or not, the barrels got to get piled up. Get back on the job. You can use the elevator; Joe'll help you."

"Do I have to?" Sam asked uneasily, looking at Johnny.

"No," Johnny said. "Go and sort counters."

Kessler exclaimed, "Somebody make you boss around here, Fletcher?"

"Why don't you ask Johnson?"

"I guess maybe I will. I heard you were down in Harry Towner's office all morning."

"Not all morning, Karl."

Kessler regarded him suspiciously, then without another word, turned on his heel and went off, apparently to find Hal Johnson.

Johnny nodded to Sam and the latter went to his bench. Johnny strolled back to his own bench. He looked at old Axel Swenson. The former sailor was working furiously, an intent scowl on his face. On the right of Johnny, Cliff Goff was picking up counters leisurely, feeling them and putting them into bunches. His head was bent to his work, but his eyes seemed to be almost glazed.

His mind was miles away, probably at Belmont or Arlington Park, booting home a winner.

Johnny said quietly, "What's good today?"

"Honeymoon'll win the sixth in a gallop," replied Cliff Goff. Then he blinked and looked at Johnny. "New man?" he asked.

"Pretty new," said Johnny. "I started yesterday morning."

"Yeah, guess you did. Your face is familiar."

"Kinda new here yourself, aren't you?"

"Me? I been here nine years. I guess it's nine years. Maybe ten."

"You have a hard time remembering such minor details," Johnny observed.

"I get a *Racing Form* in the morning on my way to work," said Cliff Goff. "It takes me seventeen minutes to ride down on the street-car. In that time I got to memorize the weight, the post position and the jockey for every horse running at two, sometimes three tracks."

"That takes a pretty good memory," Johnny suggested.

Goff nodded acknowledgment. "You ain't kidding. Then while I'm sorting counters I got to figure out the chances of every horse and I got to put down my bets on the eastern horses by twelve o'clock and the western by one."

"That takes care of you until one o'clock. What do you think about in the afternoon?"

"Yesterday's races. How the horses ran and why. Takes time and concentration, that does."

"You mean with all that thinking you give it, you don't win every race?"

"Horses are honest, but owners aren't. A horse gallops six furlongs in 1:11 on a fast track. That's pretty good time, but an owner puts a horse like that in a race and he goes to the post at even money. So he runs him for the exercise, comes in sixth . . . in 1:13. Next week he runs him and the odds are two to one. The horse comes in eighth. He loses three-four more races and he's twelve to one. Well, that's a decent price and the owner might run the horse the next time; on the other hand, he may be waiting for a real killing and hold the horse until he's forty to one. You see, I've got to put myself in the place of the

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owner, and figure out what I'd do if I was in his place."

"I know what I'd do," said Johnny. "I'd give up horses and take up cross-word puzzles."

"I can't quit," said Goff. "I'm too far behind."

Johnny shook his head and turning, moved over nearer to Axel Swenson.

"Well, Cap'n Swenson," he said cheerfully, "how's it today?"

"I like my yob," Swenson said, without looking at Johnny. "I need the money."

"Don't we all?"

"You don't make me say things I don't want to say," Swenson went on fiercely. "I mind my own business, work hard, don't bother anybody."

"I'm sure of that," said Johnny, "but you've got eyes to see and ears to hear, whether you're bothering anyone else or not. Somebody stole the knife from this bench yesterday."

"No," said Swenson desperately, "I don't see anybody taking knife. I am an old man. I cannot find new yob."

"All right," said Johnny, "we'll let it ride."

HE DRUMMED on the bench with his fingers, then whirled and headed for the far end of the sorting benches where Sam Cragg was engaged in a heated conversation with Elliott Towner. As he came up, Sam was saying:

"You can squawk all you want, but it's Johnny who'll get him in the end, you wait and see."

"Thanks, Sam," said Johnny. Then to Elliott, "Sam's right. I'll get him."

"And what'll you do when you get him?" asked Elliott sarcastically. "Talk him to death?"

Johnny chuckled. "You know, Elliott, I've got a strange idea that you don't like me."

"Well, since you brought it up, Fletcher —I don't. I think you're a four-flushing windbag. You've sold my father a bill of goods, but that's always been Dad's one weakness — he's a sucker for peculiar characters."

"He's done pretty well, for a man with a weakness. By the way, how are *you* doing?"

"I'm doing all right," snapped Elliott.

"I'm glad to hear that. How about fixing us up with a guest card at the Lakeside Athletic?"

Elliott Towner stared at Johnny, wide-eyed. "Have you gone completely crazy?"

"No," said Johnny. "I like the Lakeside Club. There's nothing like a good steam and rubdown after a hard day's work, then a good soft bed afterwards. We had to sleep in a flophouse on Halsted Street last night."

"You got some money from Dad, you can go to a hotel."

"I'd rather stay at the Lakeside—at least until I've cleaned up this business."

Elliott hesitated. "If I refuse to get the guest cards for you, you'll go to Dad?"

"Yes."

"There'll be cards waiting for you at the club tonight."

"Thanks, Elliott, that's nice cooperating. Now, do you suppose you could crowd it a little more?"

"You've crowded me too far already."

"This is business. Did you know Al Piper?"

"I didn't start to work here until Monday. Al didn't show up for work until yesterday morning."

"At eight o'clock. He wasn't killed until nine."

Elliott shook his head. "Piper wasn't even a name to me until after he was dead. I never heard of him before, I never saw him."

"But he was killed right behind you, not more than thirty feet away. Uh, you didn't hear anything?"

"I heard nothing. With those machines out in the other room, you can't hear yourself most of the time. Then they were piling up barrels back here—"

"I didn't start piling 'em up until ten o'clock," Sam cut in. "Hey—!" He suddenly whirled and headed for Joe Genara. "Hey, Joe, you were piling up barrels yesterday when I came to help you—"

Joe Genara grinned, showing even white teeth. "I was gettin' the barrels ready for piling, big boy. I'm not as strong as you are. I gotta use the elevator and with it, it takes two men to pile up the barrels. One to put them on the elevator and ride up with the barrel and the other to crank the thing.

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That's what Carmella was doing when he got sore and quit."

Johnny moved up quickly beside Sam. "Carmella was helping you back there, yesterday morning?"

"Sure, him and me usually did the piling when there was piling to do."

"You started at eight o'clock yesterday morning?"

"Five-ten minutes after eight."

"And he worked with you until he got fired?"

"Who says he got fired?"

"Didn't he?"

"Nah, he quit. Kessler came back and started jawing at him and Carmella got sore and walked off the job."

"What was Kessler complaining about?"

"Well, Carmella wasn't the fastest worker in the world."

"'Small pay, small work,'" quoted Sam.

"Sure, he was always saying that."

"You said it to me yesterday."

"I got it from Carmella. He never hurt himself working. Sort twelve, thirteen hundred pairs of counters a day. Take all morning to pile up a dozen barrels."

"With you helping him," suggested Johnny.

Joe shrugged. "Takes two people to pile up barrels. I still had to wait for him to do the cranking."

Johnny nodded. "While you were piling up barrels yesterday, or with Carmella, did Al Piper happen to come along?"

"No," said Joe quickly.

"What time did Carmella quit the job?"

"We'd only been working about a half hour or so when Kessler came up and started squawking. They went at it for a few minutes, then Carmella said the hell with it—about a quarter to nine, I'd say."

"You stayed back with the barrels, after Carmella walked off the job?"

"No, I came back here, for ten-fifteen minutes. Then Kessler told me to go back and get the barrels ready and he'd have someone else help me in a little while." Joe nodded to Sam. "I was only back there a little while when you came along."

"I think," said Johnny slowly, "that you've set the time of the murder pretty accurately—between a quarter to nine when Carmella got sore and quit his job, and nine o'clock when you came back here to get more barrels ready for further stacking."

"Could be," said Joe Genara.

Johnny caught Sam's eye and walked off a few feet. "Sam, I've got to run out for an hour or two. Maybe longer. You stick around here and keep on talking to people."

"You'll be back by five?"

"I hope so, but if I should happen to get tied up, go down to the Lakeside Athletic Club. Elliott's fixing us up with guest cards. Get a good double room and wait for me."

"All right, Johnny, but try to get back here by five o'clock, will you?"

"I will."

Johnny started down the aisle, past Johnson's desk, then whirled back and scooped up the telephone directory. He found a number, nodded and left.

Down in the office Nancy Miller looked at Johnny in surprise.

"Knocking off for the day?"

"Nope, Taffy, believe it or not, I'm working. In case I don't get back before five, remember eight o'clock."

He winked at her and left the building.

XV

ACROSS the street the Wiggins man in the black Chevrolet came to attention. Johnny waved at him, then pointed in the direction of Larrabee Street.

As he reached the corner of Larrabee Street he looked over his shoulder. The Chevrolet was crawling to a halt at the curb a short distance away.

Johnny looked down Larrabee Street and saw a taxicab approaching. He stepped into the street, held up his hand and the cab screeched to a halt. Johnny got in.

"Randolph and Wells," he said.

The cab jerked off, scooted to Chicago Avenue and turned east. At Wells it turned right and a moment later, the cab driver spoke to Johnny.

"It's none of my business, Mister, but I think there's a car following us. Black Chevvy."

"Yes," said Johnny. "Fella breaking in a set of tires for me."

The driver thought that over for a mo-

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ment, then tried again. "We ain't got far to go, but I can lose him."

"Don't bother."

The driver shrugged and pulled up at the corner of Randolph and Wells, a few minutes later. Johnny got out and giving the man a dollar looked back. The black Chevrolet was pulling in to the curb.

Johnny grinned and crossing Randolph started looking at the building numbers. Halfway down the block he turned into a rickety old building, consulted the directory, then rode in the old elevator to the fourth floor.

He stepped out in front of a ground glass door on which was lettered: *Wiggins Detective Agency. Enter.*

Johnny entered.

A gray-haired woman with horn-rim spectacles sat at a battered desk in a tiny reception room. One office door opened off the room.

"Mr. Wiggins," Johnny said.

"You have an appointment?"

"No, but I—well, I'm lookin for a good detective agency and you were highly recommended—"

"By whom?"

Johnny shook his head. "He asked me not to tell. Of course if Mr. Wiggins can't see me—"

"What's the nature of your trouble?"

"I'm not in trouble, but let it pass; there's another agency in the next block and—"

"Just a moment!"

The woman got up, opened the private office door and went in. She closed the door behind her. Johnny leaned across the desk, saw a pad of paper on which there was some writing. He swung the pad around, whistled softly: The writing read: "Begley phoned. Said subject went into leather factory. Girl drove off. Begley is waiting outside factory."

He had just flipped the pad of paper back into its former position and straightened when the inner door opened and the receptionist came out. Her eyes went from Johnny, near the desk, to the pad of paper.

"Mr. Wiggins will see you," she said, severely.

Johnny went into the private office. An enormously fat, bald man swung a squeaking swivel chair around, but did not get up.

"I'm Ed Wiggins," he wheezed. "Have a seat."

Johnny sat down on a cracked straight-backed chair.

"Perhaps I made a mistake," he began, "I was under the impression that this was a, well, *large* private detective agency."

"Ain't I big enough?" snapped Wiggins.

"Plenty," Johnny retorted, "but the job I have in mind requires the services of a couple of operators and you apparently run this place alone."

"I do the brain work," said Wiggins, angrily, "I've got the best crew of operators working for me that you could find in the whole city."

"They make their headquarters in the phone booth down in the lobby?"

Wiggins banged a fat fist on his desk, almost splintering it. "You come in here to make cracks or hire a detective? My men work on a fee basis. When I need them they go to work; when I haven't got anything for them, they stay home. How many men do you need?"

"Three."

"I got the three best men in town, Joe Carmichael, Jim White and Les Begley. Shadowing, Begley's your man, bodyguard, Carmichael and White's the lad for schmoosing up to the ladies. What's your problem?"

"A little of all three," said Johnny. "I want to find out everything there is to know about a man—his family life, his friends, his enemies, the things he did, the places he went. Everything at all that there is to know."

"Cost you money."

"I didn't expect you to do it for fun."

Wiggins leaned over his desk with somewhat of an effort and picked up a pencil. "What'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't."

Wiggins grunted. "Smith, huh? All right. Now, what's the name of the party you want investigated?"

"Piper. Al Piper."

Wiggins started to write, but hadn't scrawled more than the initial letter when he stopped and looked up at Johnny. "What's the gag? Piper's dead."

"How do you know?"

"I can read the newspapers, can't I? He

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was murdered yesterday, in a leather factory up on the north side."

THE phone on Wiggins' desk tinkled. He scooped it up. "Yeah? What . . .? All right, put him on . . . Hello . . . yes . . . what's that? I see . . . all right. Stay on the job." He hung up, leaned back in his swivel chair and folded his fat hands across the wide expanse of his stomach.

"Smith, huh? Spell it F-l-e-t-c-h-e-r, huh?"

"Improved spelling," said Johnny. He nodded to the phone. "Begley? The one who's good at shadowing?"

"What's the game?"

"No game, Wiggins. I want to hire a good detective agency."

"You can't hire this one. It's against the rules to take two clients on the one job." He hesitated. "That is if their interests, are, ah, inimical?"

"Well, are they?"

"Look, Fletcher, I know damn well that your being here isn't any coincidence. You found out this noon that Begley was shadowing you and that he worked for me. That's why you came here, isn't it?"

Johnny looked coolly at the detective, then drew his money from his pocket. He extracted a hundred dollar bill, put the rest of the money back, then smoothed out the hundred dollar bill and held it up. During the entire process Wiggins' eyes remained glued on the bill.

"Exhibit A," said Johnny, "a hale and hearty hundred dollar bill."

"Very pretty."

"Isn't it? Now, what can I buy with it?"

"You can buy one good private detective for four days, or two men for two days."

"What else will it buy?"

Wiggins continued to stare at the bill and began to wheeze. "Nothing."

"You're sure of that, Wiggins? Because in just thirty seconds I'm going to put this back into my pocket and it'll stay there."

"What do you want?" Wiggins cried.

"One word. Just one little word. The name of the person who hired you to shadow me."

"I—I can't tell you that," groaned Wiggins. Then he reached forward, grabbed up a pencil and scrawled on a slip of paper. "I can't tell you, but—" He deliberately swung his swivel chair around, so that his back was to Johnny.

Johnny leaned forward and glanced at the piece of paper on which was written a single word: *Wendland.*

"I'll be damned!" exclaimed Johnny. "I didn't think he had it in him." He dropped the hundred dollar bill on the desk.

Wiggins swiveled back, passed a fat hand over his desk and the hundred dollar bill disappeared. Johnny looked at him thoughtfully, then went through the business of taking another hundred dollar bill from his pocket.

"Now, to the business we started to discuss before. Al Piper—"

"You still want that?"

"Yes. Send a man down to Piper's neighborhood. Have him talk to Mrs. Piper, the neighbors. Find out everything there is to know about his personal life, how he got along with his wife, the neighbors. Have a second man work the neighborhood taverns, the grocers, any place he might have traded. I don't want to know how many bottles of whiskey he bought—I'm interested in the people he might have talked to in places like that; strangers he picked arguments with, while drunk. Especially the past twelve days."

"We can do that, all right," said Wiggins. He looked at the hundred-dollar bill in Johnny's hands. "Two men, for two days—?"

"No, they can get all that in one day. Two men, for one day each. A third man to check up on one Carmella Vitali, who lives in the vicinity of Oak and Milton."

"Check. He's a prime suspect. Who else?"

Johnny thought a moment, then screwing up his face, said "Harry Towner."

"The leather man?"

"The Duke, himself."

"It's none of my business how you spend your money," said Wiggins, "but I've been reading up on this case. I hardly think it likely that a man like Towner would have anything in common with this Piper fellow."

"Piper worked for Towner," Johnny said, "and so did everyone connected with this case."

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Wiggins frowned. "What do you want us to find out about Towner? It isn't easy to check up on a man like that."

"I know, but on the other hand, he's practically a public figure. The newspapers undoubtedly have a great deal of information on him in their files. I'm not a Chicagoan; things you people know about him, I don't. I'd like to get a sketch of his career—business, as well as personal."

"Well, that we can do."

"Good, get your men busy. Let's see, it's four o'clock now; I m paying you for four good men until four o'clock tomorrow afternoon. We'll see then about continuing."

"You want reports before tomorrow?"

"Yes. I'll call in. You have night telephone service, I suppose?"

"Oh yes. Granite 3-1127. My operators are supposed to report every hour if they can. But where can we reach you if something important develops?"

"The Lakeside Athletic Club. Leave a message if I'm not there."

Johnny handed Wiggins the other hundred dollar bill and prepared to leave. "You're sure now that this isn't inimical to Fred Wendland's interests?"

"Wendland?" asked Wiggins. "Who's Wendland?"

"All right," said Johnny, "you haven't said a word to me."

WIGGINS smiled weakly and Johnny left the office. Down on the street, he walked to the black Chevrolet. Begley, the Wiggins operator, regarded him sourly. "Things have changed, Begley. Better call Wiggins for new instructions."

Begley shrugged, but made no reply.

"I'm going to the Lakeside Athletic Club," said Johnny.

"I'll be inside for quite awhile so you'll have time to telephone. On second thought, why don't you give me a lift over to Michigan Avenue?"

"Beat it," snarled Begley.

"Unsociable guy," said Johnny and walked off.

He went to Madison and turned east. A few minutes later, he entered the Athletic Club where he saw a regular hotel desk, on the right. He stepped up to it.

"Mr. Elliott Towner's arranged for a guest card for me," he said to the clerk. "John Fletcher."

"Very happy to have you with us, Mr. Fletcher. You'd like a room?"

"A double room, with twin beds. Mr. Cragg will be joining me shortly."

"Very good, sir. Mr. Towner also arranged for Mr. Cragg. I have a very lovely suite overlooking the boulevard. Two rooms, with connecting bath. Do you wish us to send anywhere for your luggage?"

"Why, no," said Johnny. "I've already arranged for it to be sent over."

"Very good, sir. I'll have a boy show you up. Front!"

XVI

A UNIFORMED bellboy came quickly across the lobby. The clerk slid a key over the counter. "Show Mr. Fletcher to 612."

"This way, sir," said the bellboy.

Johnny followed him to the elevators and up to the sixth floor. There the boy led him to the front of the building and unlocked the door of Room 612.

"One of the best suites in the Club," the bellboy said. He led Johnny through the bathroom into the adjoining room, flicking on lights along the way.

Passing through the bathroom, Johnny saw a placard on the back of the door. It was headed: "Club Rules."

Rule No. 1 in bold-face type was: NO TIPPING OF EMPLOYEES.

"Hardly anyone pays any attention to it," the bellboy said brightly.

"But I'm only a guest of the club, not a member. I wouldn't want to violate the rules and get Elliott Towner in bad."

"Towner?" said the bellboy. "If that was the only thing he had to worry about."

"Quite a lad, isn't he?"

The bellboy shrugged and tried to pass Johnny in the bathroom. But Johnny pulled out his dwindling roll of bills, and began looking through them.

"Tell me about Elliott," he said, carelessly. "Been cutting up around here, has he?"

The bellboy looked steadily at the money in Johnny's hands. Johnny extracted a five dollar bill, creased it lengthwise and handed it to the boy.

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"You were going to say—?"

"Dames!" blurted the bellboy. "They ain't allowed in the club, exceptin' in the dinin' rooms, so I'm on the split shift last night and this dame comes bustin' into the lobby and says she's gotta see him. Gus, the doorman, knocks off at eleven, so he ain't on the door and she's in the lobby and headin' for the elevator before I can head her off. She gives me quite a workout, too. Course, I don't mind that, cause she's a looker and if a looker wants to rassle a fall or two with me, it's okay, but then Homer the bell captain comes up from the steam room where he's sneakin' one and I get holy hell for lettin' her in. On'y I didn't."

"She said she wanted to see Elliott Towner?"

"No-no, I get that from Nora."

"Nora?"

"The telephone operator. Nora and me are, well, we go out some a the nights I'm working the dog watch."

"Congratulations," said Johnny, drily. "I hope you and Nora will be very happy—"

"Huh? We ain't talkin' about gettin' married, nothin' like that."

"All right, then do you mind telling me what you got from Nora?"

"The stuff about this dame and Towner. She calls up all evenin', eight-ten calls and she don't get him. She leaves messages and Towner don't call back."

"He was here?"

"That's what I'm telling you, ain't I? He's here, but he tells Nora he's out, so the dame keeps callin' and leavin' messages. Important, she says, matter of life and death. So Nora feels sorry for her and just before she's going off duty, when the call comes in—"

The bellboy stopped, scowling.

"Go on," cried Johnny.

"No, I've talked too much already. As long as it was only me in it—"

Johnny whisked off a ten dollar bill and thrust it into the bellboy's hand. "Keep talking."

The boy ran the tip of his tongue around his lips, drew a deep breath. "She put the call through to Towner's room."

"And?"

"That's all."

"For ten dollars?" Johnny snarled. "Give me back that dough." He lunged for the ten dollar bill which was still in the bellboy's hand. But the latter drew back.

"All right, Nora listened in. Towner was sore as a bear with a boil on his tail, when he found out who it was, but he shut up when this girl let him have it. Of course, Nora didn't know what she was talking about, but whatever it was, it cooled off Mr. Towner."

"What was it she said?"

"I dunno. Nora couldn't figure it out. Said it wasn't so much *what* she said—"

"What was it she said?"

"Only something about: 'I know who did it,' but it certainly had an effect on Towner. He shut up right away and when he said he'd see her today, he was as meek as a mouse. This was after we threw her out of here, about eleven-thirty you know. Around midnight."

"This girl, did she give her name?"

"On the telephone? Uh-uh. On'y when she left the messages before. Just—'Nancy called'."

"Nancy!" cried Johnny.

"Yeah, Nancy." The bellboy's eyes slitted. "Know her?"

"No," said Johnny.

"I been thinkin' today," the bellboy went on, "Towner's old man owns a big leather factory up on the north side and there was a murder there yesterday and I was thinkin'—"

"Don't," said Johnny, "don't think."

"Yeah, maybe you're right. Uh, what I been tellin' you, that's just between us, huh? You could cost me my job, maybe. And Nora—"

"Don't worry. Not a word to anyone."

"Thanks, and, uh, if you need anything, just call the bell stand and ask for Number 3. If you forget the number, ask for Augie."

"Augie, Number 3; I'll remember."

Augie, Number 3, stowed away his haul of fifteen dollars and left the suite.

Johnny made a quick tour through the rooms, then stepped to a desk and found some club stationery. He picked up a pen and wrote: "Sam, come down to the steam room."

He stuck the message in the frame of the dresser mirror where it would be seen read-

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ily and leaving the suite, rode down the elevator to the steam room. An attendant showed him to a locker room and gave him a towel and a sheet. Draping the sheet around him he stepped into the hot air room.

There were several wooden deck chairs scattered about the room, two or three of which were occupied by nude club members. Johnny spread the sheet out over a vacant chair and seated himself on it. Even through the sheet, the wood of the chair was near the scorching point, for the temperature in the room was 180 degrees.

Perspiration broke out on his body inside of a minute or two and in ten minutes it streamed off his body. He remained in the room another ten minutes, then came out and took a hot shower. He finished off with cold water, then ran to the swimming pool and dove in.

He went down deep, came up and looked into the face of Fred Wendland, less than two feet from his own.

"Freddie!" Johnny exclaimed. "Imagine meeting you here."

Treading water, Wendland looked at him blankly a moment before recognition dawned on him. "Fletcher," he said, then "How the devil did you get in here?"

"Guest card. And you?"

"I'm a member of this club."

Johnny wasn't good at treading water, so swam to the edge of the pool. He climbed up and sat down on the tile, dangling his legs in the water. A few feet away, Wendland continued to tread water. His face wore an angry scowl.

"Too bad you ran out this noon," Johnny said, cheerfully. "If you'd hung around, I'd've introduced you to the shamus. We had quite a little tete-a-tete."

"I'm not interested in private detectives," snapped Wendland. He swam closer to the edge of the pool, then began treading water again. "And I don't understand why a man like you would want a guest card at this club. As much gall as you've got, you must know that you don't fit in here."

"Why, I thought I was fitting in very well," Johnny replied, mockingly. "I've done a good day's work, so now I'm relaxing at the club. A steam, a little swim, then a rubdown and I'm all set for the evening."

"You know damn well what I meant, Fletcher. The people here aren't your sort."

"They've got two heads and I've only got one?"

"You're a common laborer."

"A common laborer built this swimming pool, Wendland. Common laborers raise the food you eat and make the clothes you wear. And as for me, specifically, Freddie boy—" Johnny got to his feet, roused. "Name one thing in which you think you're superior to me. Physically, I can lick the hell out of you—"

"That remains to be seen," snarled Wendland.

"And mentally, Freddie, in what respect do you figure you've got it over me? I can make a fool out of you on any subject you name."

"I've had enough from you, Fletcher," sputtered Wendland. "Wait until I climb out of here—" He swam quickly for the edge of the pool, began to clamber out.

Johnny watched him coolly. "You've admitted it yourself, hiring the Wiggins Detective Agency to shadow me."

WENDLAND, half out of water, stared at Johnny in astonishment. "Wh-what are you talking about?"

"A man named Begley's been following me all day. He's outside the club right now. He works for the Wiggins Agency. And *you* hired them."

Wendland finished climbing out of the pool, but was no longer belligerent. A confused frown twisted his features.

"Why are you having me shadowed, Wendland?" Johnny continued. "You know damn well I didn't kill Al Piper. So why? Are you afraid of something *I* might find out about you?"

Wendland suddenly whirled and walked away from Johnny. Johnny was still looking after him, when Sam Cragg appeared on the far side of the pool. He spied Johnny and waved.

Johnny gestured him to come around the pool and rose to meet him. "Get yourself a quick steam and a swim, Sam, while I have a rubdown," he said, "then we'll put on the feedbag."

"One of those nice steaks that they cook so badly here, Johnny?" Sam asked.

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Johnny chuckled. "We'll force ourselves to eat them." An attendant approached and Sam went off to the locker rooms. Johnny found an idle masseur and went into a cubicle with him, where he stretched out on a rubbing table.

The masseur covered him with a sheet, then peeling it back off one leg, rubbed olive oil on the limb. He gripped it in both hands and began to work on it. He had tremendously powerful fingers and seemed to find every tender muscle. While he worked, he talked.

"New member, sir, aren't you?" he asked.

"Only a guest. Towner put me up."

"Oh, Mr. Towner, the leather man. I give him a rubdown two-three times a week. Wonderful condition for a man his age. Fifty-nine years old and you wouldn't think he was more'n forty-nine. Keeps in good shape. Mmm, you got a kink in a muscle here." He worked on it and Johnny had to gasp to keep from wincing in pain. The masseur chuckled. "It's you young fellas don't watch yourselves. Don't exercise, don't work."

"Yeah," said Johnny, "you may be right. By the way, just to test your powers of observation—what business would you say I was in?"

The masseur put down the leg, covered it and exposed the other one. "Stocks, Board of Trade. Maybe radio or advertising."

"You wouldn't take me for a laborer?"

"Ha! You? You wouldn't be living at the club, if you was a laborer. Besides you don't have the muscle for it."

"I could be a laborer out of work."

"No sir, you couldn't. I know a gentleman when I see one."

"You think I'm a gentleman?"

"Oh, sure. That's one thing I know—gentlemen. I have worked at this club for nine years. I massage forty-fifty gentlemen a week. Never make a mistake about a gentleman."

"Ever massage Freddie Wendland?"

"Two-three times a month."

"And he's no different than I am?"

"How you mean? He is younger man than you, but otherwise the same as you—a gentleman."

Johnny grinned and wondered what Wendland would say to that. He relaxed under the probing hands of the masseur and a half hour later got up from the table, feeling five years younger.

Sam was still in the pool, enjoying himself, but he climbed out and both dressed and adjourned to the grill room. They ordered steaks and when they finished eating it was after seven.

Johnny signed the check with a flourish and they left the grill room.

"And now for our date," Johnny said.

"We got a date?"

"I have," said Johnny.

"With a girl?"

"With what would I have a date? It's the girl with the taffy-colored hair at the plant. Nancy Miller."

Sam brightened. "Say, she's all right. I passed a few words with her myself, this noon." He cleared his throat. "I wonder if she's got a friend."

"Every girl's got a friend, Sam."

"C'n you call her and ask?"

"Mm, that might not be such a good idea. On the phone a girl can make excuses. We'll surprise her and then she'll have to come through with the friend."

"Didn't we do that in St. Louis once? The girl weighed two hundred pounds."

"Yes, but she was affectionate, wasn't she?"

"You ain't kiddin' Johnny, every pound of her was affectionate. I'm gonna hold out for a girl about Nancy's size."

They left the club and had the doorman get a cab for them. Climbing in, Johnny gave the driver Nancy Miller's Armitage Avenue address.

The cabby made an illegal U turn and headed north up Michigan. Behind them a black Chevvy executed the same illegal U turn. Johnny saw the Chevvy in the rear vision mirror and swore. "You can't trust anybody these days."

Sam did not hear him. He was wrapped in heavy thought, pondering about his blind date.

(*To be concluded in the next* SHORT STORIES)

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MEN who wouldn't DIE!

by George C. Appell

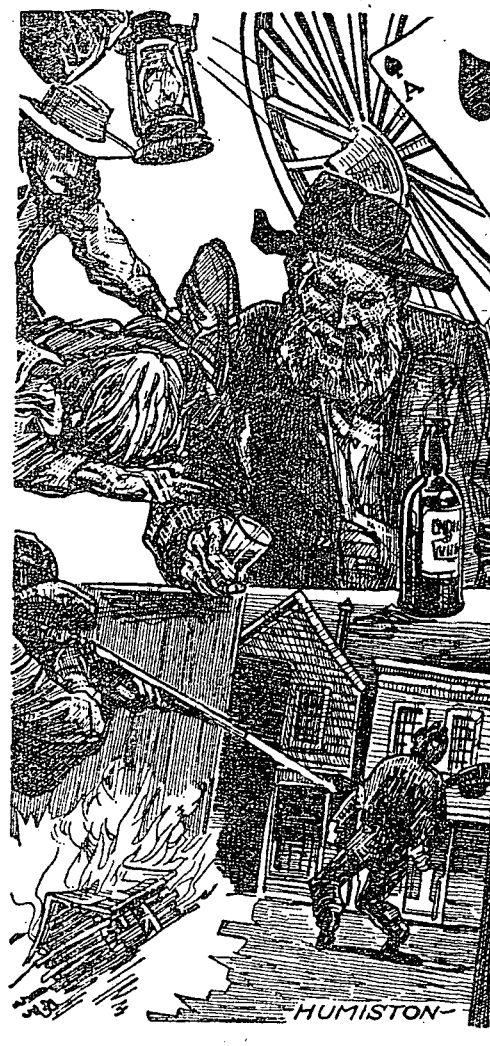
Hardboots

HE WAS like a dried lemon, this shriveled has-been who'd prospected from Montana to Mexico, from Anaconda to Alaska. But the tales he told were of treasure in gold, of treasure in jewels—he told them for drinks. They bought him drinks—laughing at him—and went away. Then one night, there were two who stayed. The northern California stars were bright, the whiskey flowed neat: what was his name? one man asked.

"Call me Joe Barnes." And he reached for the crock.

They wanted to know more: any relatives? friends? former addresses? business associates?

No—he was alone in this world, an old man forgotten by time. "Just call me Hardboots," he pleaded. He'd been a lonely failure for years; he wanted a sobriquet of distinction. These two new friends insured him for twenty thousand dollars, put him up in a shack, and let him babble on. Then he was shot in the back—twice. And lived. A month later, he dropped to the floor with poisoned whiskey racking his system. And lived. Later still, staggering to the shack one night, a team and rig thundered over him and sped on into the night. And he recovered. His new friends weren't calling so frequently. Then the shack caught fire, and he barely escaped from the flames. Bent, sick, broken, he refused to admit the truth that he and his new friends knew. An insurance man came, in September of 1896, and put it up to him:



"Joe Barnes—take precautions. Choose new friends. Stop drinking."

Odd, it still remains, that both friends were found dead—apparently suicides from gunshot wound—and Joe Barnes, premiums unpaid, insurance lapsing, lived on for a dozen years, telling his tales for drinks. But he never made any more new friends, did Hardboots.

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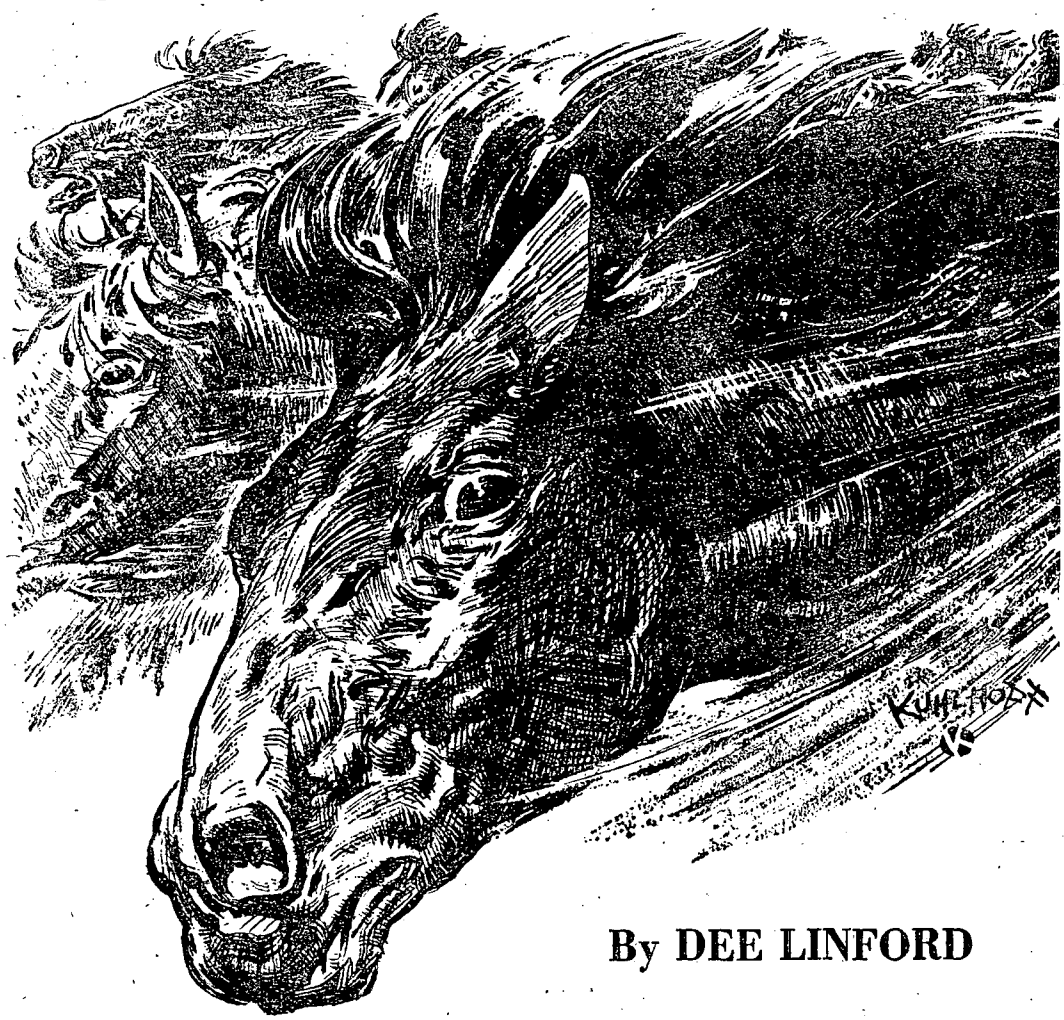
. . . . *Rounding Up Mustangs, Not Escaped Convicts*

THE HUNTED

I

THE whole thing was amazingly easy. So unbelievably easy that McCord wondered afterward why it had taken five years to happen:

The prison laundry had no steam, and the warden was sending the week's washing out. They packed the dirty clothes and linen in wooden barrels from the commissary, and the stake-body truck backed up to the laundry door to load. McCord was on the truck, arranging the barrels as they came up, and the last one handed him was all but empty. McCord rolled it into place, and found himself momentarily alone, unwatched. He climbed inside the inviting drum, squeezed himself down, and covered his head with a sheet from the barrel behind.



By DEE LINFORD

McCord held his breath when he heard the overseer coming out of the damp brick structure, talking with the trusty who drove the truck. But the overseer didn't seem to notice McCord's absence. The trusty made

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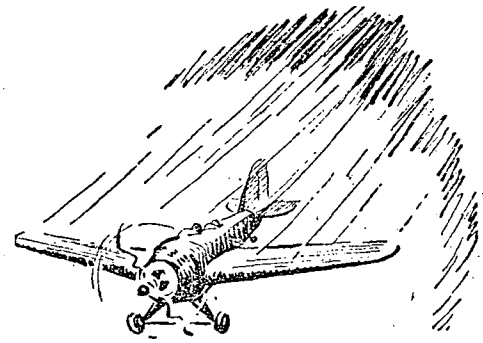
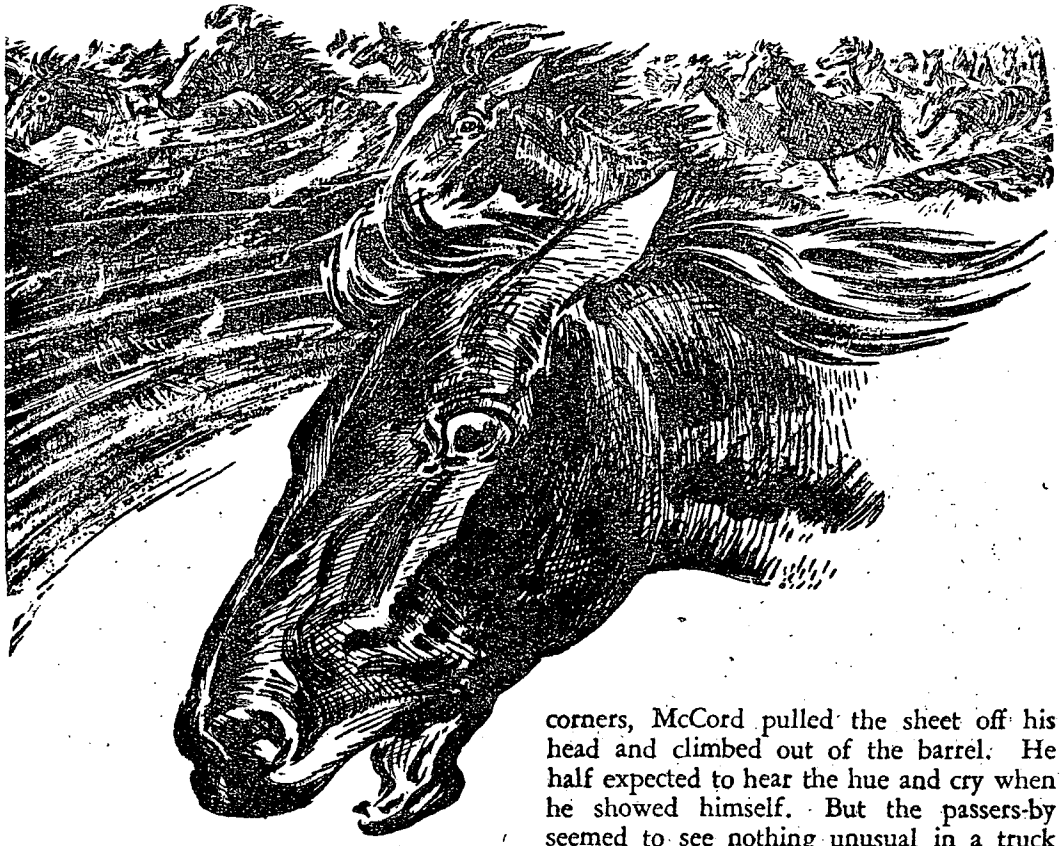
the usual thin jokes about not coming back, and McCord heard the endgate close and the car door slam. Then the motor roared, and the truck's vibrations went through him like an electric shock.

McCord was on his way.

There was a bad moment at the gate, where the trusty made with the same joke about seeing the guards in Boston sometime. The guard on the wall wanted to know how many yard birds the trusty had





stached in the barrels, and the trusty said two in each. McCord heard them laugh, but the perspiration came out on his forehead, and ran down into his eyes. His heart hammered so violently he was certain they all could hear it, and his very breath scorched his lungs.

But, like all moments, this one passed. The guard told the trusty about a girl to look up, and they laughed, and the truck lurched ahead. The iron gates clanged shut and McCord felt he could begin to breathe again.

When the truck had turned a couple of corners, McCord pulled the sheet off his head and climbed out of the barrel. He half expected to hear the hue and cry when he showed himself. But the passers-by seemed to see nothing unusual in a truck loaded with wooden barrels, a man in blue jeans standing amongst them.

They don't know, just from looking at me, that I'm a con, he thought. *As far as looks go, I'm still like men on the outside.*

It seemed incredible that this should be. But he had small time to reflect on it. The truck was slowing for a stop street, and when it had halted, McCord stepped over the rear rack panel and dropped to the ground behind it. The truck rolled on, with a grinding and clashing of gears, and McCord stepped casually up onto the sidewalk

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and turned back in the opposite direction. Passers-by continued to pay him no attention, and he began to really believe then that it was going to work.

Ahead of him lay an alley that ran down to the freight yards, where drifting strangers would be noticed even less than on the streets. He walked toward it, purposefully but not too fast, and reached it without incident. Turning down it, he slowed his gait to a saunter, and filled his lungs with the air of freedom—finding it heady and sweet, but edged with fear.

FORTIFIED by contact with a friend, the next morning found McCord halfway across the Funeral Flats, deep in the Red Desert, astride a borrowed horse, heading for a broken line of hills that hung like a mirage along the northern horizon. McCord had planned to reach those hills by daylight, and hole up in the rocks until night should render travel safe once more. But there was already sufficient light to see the pock-marked buttes and mesas plainly, and they seemed more distant now than they had appeared by moonlight.

The fugitive felt a rising sense of urgency—a pressing need for haste. Kinkaid had told him the night before that the alarm had been sounded. Trainmen had been alerted to watch for him, and the state patrol was stopping all cars on the highway. The customary reward had been offered for his recapture, and the deputies might already be on his trail. But the horse under him was lagging, and he wasn't at all certain where he would find water. So he held the mare to a steady walk, and prayed silently that the distance to the hills would not be as great as it appeared. But he knew in his heart that he had far to go—that prayers would not change the immutable fact of the desert. He knew that he had miscalculated, and that the mistake might cost him his life.

The sun had risen and the hills ahead were still purple with distance when he heard the plane. He turned sharply in the saddle and quickly spotted it; a light sporting model, flying low and still nosing down. He watched it intently, and all his fears and premonitions matured into monstrous black certainty. The plane was pointed squarely at him. It seemed to be growing larger by the second.

Kinkaid, he was remembering, had warned him against the desert. "Even if you could make to the Sweetwater, which I doubt," Kinkaid had said, "you got open country all the way. The sheep have all pulled out, and a man on horseback up there would stick out like a wart on Sally Rand. Till things cool off, town's the place to hide—not the desert."

Kinkaid had talked hard sense, as McCord had known. Yet McCord had not been able to heed his friend's advice. For five years, McCord had been remembering the solitude and silence of the desert. For five long years, he'd dreamed of the desert's immensity and indifference, its unbounded spaces where a man might lose himself forever—not merely from the deputies and prison guards, but from the whole hostile society that bred deputies and prison guards. A society which had accused McCord falsely and caged him like a vicious animal. Handed him over to the deputies and guards, and conveniently forgot that he existed.

For five years, escape and the desert had been one concept in McCord's obsessed thinking, and he had been unable to separate the two, even after Kinkaid had warned that the world had changed since McCord had left it. Even after Kinkaid had warned that the desert was no longer a sanctuary for the hunted, he had repeated his request for a horse and outfit and gun, refusing to be dissuaded. In the end, his friend had capitulated, and McCord had ridden confidently and triumphantly into the night. Now the desert was betraying him—delivering him up to his enemies, just as Kinkaid had predicted.

"They won't take me back!" he snarled impotently, fingering the pistol in the pocket of his borrowed coat. "They can kill me, and I hope they do. But I won't go back!"

And his eyes left the plane and raked the flats for a ledge or gully behind which he could hide. For a tree or even a rock, behind which a man might make a stand.

But there was no wash or ledge or tree in all that flat pan of desolation. There was nothing but the sand and hard-pan, covered by miserly rabbit brush and shadscale that wouldn't hide a snake. There

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was nothing but McCord, straddle of a jaded horse. Sticking out like a wart on Sally Rand. Trapped like rabbit in a pan, crossed by the shadow of a hawk.

The plane came on, and McCord turned his back on it, unconsciously seeking to banish an untenable reality by ignoring it—a trick he had learned in prison. But the plane droned nearer, and McCord hunched his shoulders against the driving sound, his back feeling naked and cold. He gripped the gun in his pocket and wondered whether he could down a plane with a pistol, the way he'd seen it done in a movie.

The question was still in his mind when the droning swelled to a savage roar. A bird-shaped shadow glided past him, and there was a wild rushing of the wind—a sound like buzzard wings beating the air at the back of his neck. He ducked instinctively and turned in his saddle, glancing up in confusion, like a chicken beset by a hawk. He had a fleeting impression of an immense silver dragonfly, from which two glassed-in faces peered down at him whimsically. Then a snorting blast of sound struck him like a solid thing, and the plane was showing him its tail, soaring to regain altitude.

The leg-weary horse had sufficient vigor to shy violently, and by the time McCord had it under control again, the plane was growing small with distance. More puzzled than relieved, he watched it till his vision blurred, and still it did not turn, either to set down on the flats or to wing back to town with its news. Instead, it continued to climb, and headed deeper into the desert. Bending off toward the broken line of hills that had been McCord's destination.

The fugitive wrestled with the enigma presented, and a door opened in his memory, and he heard Kinkaid again, repeating words which had not registered the night before.

"Another thing," his friend had said again. "That flying mustanger, Skin Hubbard, is working the desert north of here now. He's got a camp on Separation creek, but he and his pilot spend their nights in town. They fly up every morning and back every night, and besides that, the pilot covers a lot of square miles every day, spooking broomtails into Hubbard's horse traps. Let that pair spot you, and the fun will be over. They'd both ship their mothers as canners, if they could turn a dollar on the deal."

McCord nodded in acknowledgment. That explained it. That was why the plane hadn't stopped. It was Hubbard's plane, and Hubbard rounded up wild horses, not fleeing convicts. The mustangers had no interest in him. They had only buzzed him for the hell of it.

So McCord told himself, as he stared after the receding craft with watering eyes. But his heart remained shriveled to the size of a pea, and he still breathed shallowly, nostrils flared like those of the panicked mare. For he was whistling past a graveyard, and knew it.

The mustangers had no way to be certain of his identity, and therefore would not make a special trip back to town to report his presence. But they had been suspicious, or they wouldn't have gone to the trouble of looking him over. They would be flying into town that evening, and were sure to tell the warden what they'd seen. Tomorrow, other planes would scout the desert. Planes manned with guards and deputies, armed with machine guns. And Kinkaid had called the turn. You couldn't hide from planes, in the desert.

"So you've got till tonight to run that pair down, and quiet their suspicions—or their tongues," he addressed himself thinly, aloud—another habit he had brought out of the penitentiary. "It's got to be one way or the other. And it's all up to you."

But he was wondering, even as he spoke, whether he would be able to use the pistol in his pocket, when the chips were down. Whether he could point it at a human being, and pull the trigger, and watch the agony of a death he personally had caused. It seemed now that he should have thought of this before stepping into the barrel on the laundry truck. Cons who couldn't kill to avoid recapture shouldn't break jail. Men who couldn't use guns shouldn't carry them.

And he smiled ironically to think how surprised the cons and guards and deputies would be to know that the thought of killing sickened him. For McCord had been convicted of murder, and even his closest friends had believed him guilty. McCord,

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at times, had half believed in that guilt himself—had made a game of believing in it, because it had seemed to make his punishment more bearable. He'd found a perverse satisfaction in bragging to the prison guards and inmates of how he'd hammered to death a man he'd scarcely seen, whereas actually he found it hard to crush a fly. And his boasts had made good news copy, as he'd seen from the papers Kinkaid had shown him the night before.

"CONFESSED KILLER FLEES PEN!" the local sheet had screamed in fat, black type. "ROBBER-SLAYER NOW AT LARGE—IS DANGEROUS AND MAY BE ARMED!"

The newspapers and the funny books! McCord thought sourly.

II

THE question of the gun he carried still burned unanswered in McCord's mind when, several hours later, he approached the illusive hills. But the mustangers had been much easier to locate than he had expected. Sound travels far on the desert wind, and for some time he had been hearing the plane, alternately snoring and roaring, off toward the hills. And about noon he spotted the craft again: a fleck of mirrored sunlight, soaring and swooping like a falcon gone berserk, above a ragged dust column that moved erratically across the sullen flats and ridges.

McCord as a habit had read most of the newspapers and magazines in the prison library, and was familiar with the general story of the great mustang roundups of the time. It seemed that sheepmen whose flocks grazed the deserts in winter frowned on the presence of wild horses on their range allotments, and an obliging government had declared all unbranded horses on the public domain to be in trespass. The wild horses, thus, were law-breakers by definition, and the government didn't temporize with criminals. The government paid wranglers a bounty for each wild horse removed from the public ground, and permitted them to keep the horses. Skin Hubbard, a broken-down bronc stomper and bankrupt rancher, was making a good thing of the opportunity afforded. Besides its liberal subsidy, the government furnished him a plane and pilot, and Hubbard had made wild horse running a big business.

McCord topped a sharp rise above a dry creek bed, and could see the trap itself—a pole-and-slab corral in a blind box canyon, in a fold in the brooding hills. Entrance to the trap was a narrow runway between two sheer-sided mud buttes; and from the trap's entrance, camouflaged barbwire wings spread fanwise for a mile or two across the desert. The pilot's task was to locate the mustang bands and spook them inside the invisible funnel. Then hidden horsemen appeared and hazed them inside the trap.

McCord knew this. He had seen the pictures, and read the text, in the Sunday supplements. The knowledge might come in handy.

Off across the flats, the plane climbed steeply and plummeted down, filling the air with its sonorous snoring, backfiring in the dives with crackling reports like pistol shots. The pilot appeared to be in trouble with the band he was coursing. He was covering the same strip of desert time and again, lining a horse band back and forth, and getting no closer to the trap. But there was a man down in the box canyon, fussing with the trap fence, and McCord rode slowly toward him, rehearsing in his mind the things he must say.

Business had been good at this particular trap, as McCord could see, once he was inside the blind canyon. A holding pen beyond the first corral contained upward of forty horses, ranging in age from very young to very old. There were bays and sorrels and claybank roans. Paints and stockinged blacks—big chested, narrow-haunched, with long tails that swept the ground. There were palominos and palmettos, grays with black Arab spots on withers and flanks. There were heavy draft mares with collar marks and work-bent knees—fugitives from sheep camps and the fringe dry farms and ranches.

All were gaunt and dusty and bedraggled, as sorry a gathering of horses as McCord could imagine, for all their fine coloring. They stood with lowered heads and open mouths, like panting dogs. McCord looked closer to discover the reason, and felt

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slightly sick when he saw it. Short lengths of rusty wire had been pushed through the flesh on either side of their nostrils, and the protruding ends had been twisted together to seal the nasal air passages.

McCord had heard of the "nose hobble," from hardcase horse stompers he had known in his youth. It ranked with the snubbing loop as a torture device for subduing unruly spirits, and was in its way even more effective. Deprive any creature of its breath, and you reduce its capacity for resisting aggression.

Horses, it was true, did learn in time to breathe through their mouths. But mouth-breathing, in the desert, was in itself as fiendish a torture as ever came out of hell.

This is a side of the business that doesn't get into the Sunday supplements, McCord thought bleakly.

THE man at the fence turned as McCord came up. He was tall and long-legged, slightly hunched at the shoulders. He was dressed in a fashion that became a mustanger: runover boots and denims jeans and jacket, topped off by a high-crowned hat. McCord kenned at once that this would be Skin Hubbard. But he had difficulty in reconciling the man with the pictures he had seen in the Sunday supplements.

The Sunday supplements had represented Hubbard as a genial, kindly-disposed man, insouciant and unhurried—the essence of glamor and personal charm. A citizen of distinction and good will. McCord saw a mean-mouthed, hatchet-faced man, contrary-eyed and suspicious and latently hostile. A man who in numerous subtle ways suggested the warden at the penitentiary, and excited in McCord a deep-seated intuitive dislike, shot through with resentment and fear. A man McCord believed he could kill.

But McCord contained his instinctive aversion, and made his manner casual, his voice hearty as he spoke.

"Your name Hubbard?" he inquired, reining in beside the fence and slouching over his saddle horn.

The mustanger nodded warily, and put down the wire cutters he held in his hand. In a manner that was too casual to be casual at all, he walked to his horse, and stood with one hand on the stock of his booted rifle. Unobtrusively, he maneuvered the horse so that it came between him and McCord, and he watched the fugitive narrowly across the animal's back. McCord then knew for certain that the horse-runner suspected his true identity. Knew that his act must be good.

"Mine's Morgan," he went on, broaching the lie he had readied to explain his presence in the desert, alone. "I ride for Kinkaid. He thinks he might have some horses in this bunch you are working."

He paused in the sales talk to witness the customer's reaction. If the customer swallowed it, fine and dandy. If the customer didn't want any—McCord would have to make a quick decision. He averted his eyes, for fear the mustanger would see the apprehension in them. He felt the other's gaze on him, weighing and judging him, and a stricture filled his chest. The palm of the hand in his coat pocket felt damp and oily against the grips of the pistol.

"Kinkaid, eh?" the mustanger said at length. "Hell, Kinkaid's got more trash horses around his place now than he's got feed for. There's sure none of his in that bunch."

McCord looked back into the hatchet-shaped face, and saw it darkening with protest. And the tightness went out of his chest. His hunch had been a good one. Threaten a man like Hubbard through the pocketbook, and he'd forget everything but that threat. The mustanger's suspicions, if not dead, were at least crowded to the back of his mind.

"I expect I'll have a look," McCord allowed pointedly, "as long as I'm here."

He would have dismounted. But the long ride—his first in five years—had left his legs raw, his knee-joints so stiff that he doubted that he'd be able to dismount unassisted. So he gigged the mare over to the corral gate, dropped it from the saddle, and rode inside, toward the holding pen at the far side. The prisoner-horses watched him intently, and he thought uncomfortably of the faces of the men in the bull pen at the penitentiary whenever one of the parole lawyers was seen to enter. But he closed his mind to such profitless associations, and made himself meet the watching eyes—

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callous and indifferent, like a citizen in good standing.

Outside the corral and the holding pen, but within the larger enclosure formed by the sheer mud walls, lay a villainous looking bog, into which a length of rusty pipe had been thrust. The pipe dripped brackish water into a wooden trough, and the dehydrated mare nickered at it, softly. McCord dropped another gate without dismounting, and rode toward the trough, painfully aware of the eyes that watched forlornly from the holding pen.

"Put them gates up behind you!" the mustanger called from the outer fence. And the familiar tone of the command, imperative and arrogant, awoke something black and monstrous inside McCord. He had heard that one too often in the past five years. He had promised himself countless times that he'd break apart with his hands any man who used it on him, once he was on the outside. But he was not safely outside yet, and knew that he must postpone this luxury. He succeeded in choking down the impulse toward violence, but the effort left him shaken, and the darkness remained in his mind.

"Aw, keep your shirt on," he called back sourly. "I'll put your gates up when I come out." And his teeth bit off cleanly the match stick he'd been chewing to keep down thirst.

Dry as the mare was, she sniffed the water and pawed the trough impatiently before condescending to drink moderately of its content. McCord saw that Hubbard was preoccupied at the fence again, and decided to take a chance on getting out of the saddle. The maneuver was painful and brought the sweat beading out on his forehead, even though the early spring wind was cold. But he managed it without falling down, and after a minute was able to stand without holding onto the horse.

McCord himself was dry, but he accepted the mare's opinion of the water in the trough, and—keeping the mare between him and the tortured watchers in the holding pen—he tilted his canteen and drank from it, but sparingly, until he knew more of the local supply. Then he took another chance, and walked gingerly back through the gate he had dropped, leading the mare behind him. His legs were beginning to limber, and Hubbard seemed to pay him no attention.

The mustanger did look up to see that he closed the gate, and although it cost him dearly in discomfort and sweat, McCord did his utmost to make his movements fluid and natural. A man who rode for Kinkaid would not be knocked out by a thirty mile ride from town.

The gate up, he walked to the holding pen, pulled the stuck clothing away from his chafed knees and thighs, and inspected the catch. The incarcerated animals appeared not to have had water for several days, and McCord's disaffection for Skin Hubbard deepened to something approaching hatred. But again he closed his mind to matters that did not concern him and turned it to matters that did. He looked sharply for brands, and gave himself a turn by spotting a blurred Bar X, the Kinkaid iron.

"Here's a Kinkaid mare," he called triumphantly, aware that his knowing the marking would buttress his lie that he was here representing the rancher. "That blue roan plug with the roached mane."

The mustanger put down his fencing tools and crossed the corral toward him. Suspicion seemed entirely dead in him now. There was nothing in the hatchet face now but displeasure and sheepish ill will.

"That could be a Bar X," the horse-runner conceded grudgingly. "I thought it was only a wire scar." And McCord grinned in satisfaction.

"How long you expect to be working these flats?" he inquired, pressing an advantage.

"I figure to finish up tomorrow," the mustanger said gloomily.

"I reckon I'll stick around," McCord said easily.

The horse-runner looked dubious. "I dunno. Me and my pilot fly into town nights. The plane don't carry but two."

"I'll stay out here," McCord told him, "If I can borrow your camp."

"There's nothing to eat," the mustanger objected, glancing at his guest's saddlebags.

"I'll board myself," McCord told him tersely. "I figured on staying a night or so, and brought what I need."

The mustanger flushed faintly, and looked

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away. "I don't expect you'll find any more Kinkaid horses," he said irately. "Anyhow, I'm supposed to get three dollars a head for what I take off the gov'ment land. How about that?"

"Kinkaid will see you get your three bucks for all his plugs you corral," McCord said dryly, wondering if it were true. At which the horse-runner brightened somewhat.

"Well, that'll be all right. But if you're going to use my camp, you'd might as well lend a hand while you're here. My wranglers quit last week, and I'm short handed."

AS HE spoke, the mustanger raised his eyes to the sky, where the plane roared insistently, and executed a rough figure S. "The pilot says he's ready to bring 'em in, so we'd better get out in the wings," he announced.

He turned and set off at a rapid walk that made McCord stretch his raw legs to keep pace.

"Your pilot 'ppears to be having trouble with that bunch," he commented, feeling the need for continued conversation.

"Trouble?"

"Yeah. He's been covering the same ground out there, back and forth, for two-three hours."

The mustanger grunted. "That ain't trouble. That's a cure for trouble. He's wearing the obscenities down, so's they won't give us any arguments at the trap."

McCord was silent a time, digesting this added tidbit. The entire pattern here was one of bestial ferocity—of callous and deliberate cruelty that appalled and sickened. First the mustang's hearts were broken with prolonged running at top speed. Then their nostrils were closed to prevent breathing, and they were penned up away from water, tortured with thirst. And McCord had thought that he'd met up with experts, back at the pen. This horse-runner could teach the warden a lot!

"How far you ordinarily run a band before you bring it in?" he asked in a tone that thinned in spite of his effort to control it.

"Seventy—eighty—hundred miles," the other said blandly. "Depends on the bunch."

And McCord stared at him across a blur. So this was Skin Hubbard—the Flying Cowboy! The much-feted King of the Mustangers. The glamorous Horseman in the Sky. The horse-loving wrangler-turned-airman that all the nation was applauding!

I'd like to write the Sunday papers, McCord thought bitterly.

III

THE pictures McCord had seen of the aerial horse roundups had been vivid enough: halftones and color shots of wild-eyed mustangs in action tableau—manes and tails in classic disarray, a fragile looking aircraft suspended in frozen flight above. But it was one thing to loaf in the prison library, drowsing over a rotogravure section, and something else to sit a horse in a desert wash, watching a bee-sized plane cavort and weave and plunge behind a string of live horses, herding them across the flats as a well-trained dog herds sheep.

McCord had run mustangs for sport as a youth, and he found this a breath-taking spectacle. The dust-shrouded horse band wheeled and broke frantically in repeated efforts to shake off their winged pursuer. But the zigzagging plane pulled up and dived again with daredevil disregard of the law of gravity, turning the stragglers and recalcitrants back into the herd—banking sharply and circling back to whoop up the flagging drags, wing tips skimming the brush.

The ease with which one piece of man-made machinery established absolute mastery over a score of the wildest creatures on earth was incredible, and—to McCord—somehow intimidating. He was aware of a feeling of slow creeping horror, as he watched. If twenty wild horses were helpless before a single flying machine, what chance had one man against a whole flock of them—such as would scout the desert when the warden learned McCord was there?

"That pilot doesn't think much of his neck," McCord said sourly, wishing in his heart that the daredevil would cut it too fine just once and crack up.

"He's a pistol!" the mustanger exclaimed with relish. "Crazier'n a sheepherder figuring the long way of a square quilt; Killt a

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coyote with a wing the other day. And that's the truth!"

McCord didn't doubt it. And it struck him as cruelly unfair that one whose life was as full and unfettered as the pilot's should hold it in such small esteem, whereas McCord had had to fight bitterly and endlessly, as long as he remembered, in order to perpetuate the narrow and meaningless existence which he called life.

But the broomtail band was near enough now that he could distinguish between horses and dust. His eyes had centered on a white stallion which ran several lengths ahead of the others. The animal was seventeen hands high if one, with flowing mane and tail, and it ran so lightly even yet that its feet seemed not to touch the ground.

"Look at that horse!" McCord breathed, himself and his troubles forgotten in the eye-filling sight.

"Keep your fool head down!" his companion snapped. "Or he will look at you!"

But the white stallion already had decided not to enter the trap. Pivoting without warning, he screamed a command to the rest of the band and headed back for the open desert. The pilot, taken off guard, nosed the plane over and dived perilously. But the stallion was under it and gone—a blurred gray ghost in the dust.

"Head the beast back!" the mustanger bawled raucously. "Turn him around!" But by the time the plane had gained sufficient altitude to bank and turn, the stallion was two hundred yards away, going strong, blasting another call to the others to follow.

The others now were milling in confusion, and the plane hung a moment in apparent indecision—trying to choose between the stallion, which was free, and the others, which might be lost if the pilot went in pursuit of the stud. McCord hung on the pilot's decision, as if his own welfare and freedom were at stake, forgetting to breathe in his suspense.

The stallion trumpeted a third command, and one snaky black gelding broke from the milling band, reaching for distance. Others began to follow, and the pilot chose to hold the band, letting the stallion go. The plane swooped down at the black, and McCord found himself cheering wildly. He broke the cheer off, as quick as he discovered it was his own, fearing that Hubbard would think it strange. But the mustanger was too busy cursing the pilot and the white stud to notice McCord.

"I'll get me a man that can fly that crate—by the gods I will!" the mustanger fumed. But McCord's attention was on the plane.

The pilot took a roaring pass at the snaky black, but the black had a line on the fleeing stallion, and would not be turned. The plane overshot, zoomed and swooped again. McCord heard a sound like gunshot, and this time the black whirled as if it had been clubbed, staggering back in the direction prescribed. An ear and an eye were gone, and the whole side of its head was a bloody hash. McCord comprehended then that not all the gun-like reports he'd been hearing had come from the plane's exhaust, and the sickness came back to his stomach.

The now leaderless horse band was still milling in bewilderment, and refused to give way before the diving plane. McCord was praying that the whole bunch would escape when he heard Hubbard's voice snarling at his ear.

"Come on. We got to get around them. That knothead is going to lose them all!"

As he spoke, the mustanger was spurring up out of the wash. McCord followed reluctantly. Hubbard swung wide of the spiraling band, with McCord crowding behind, and luck was with them. The mustangs were puzzled and terrorized by the threat from the air, and did not see the horsemen until the latter were well around them, blocking the way to freedom.

Even so, the panicked herd now had its bearings, and was determined to say out of the trap. A short-coupled buckskin with black mane and tail and the proud ancestral black stripe along its spine broke from the band and circled McCord at a mighty run.

"Turn 'em back!" Hubbard bellowed. McCord hesitated. But the black mare, a rained cow horse, saw what was to be done, and leaped almost from under him, throwing herself into a contest of speed against the buckskin. Then McCord too was caught in the age-old thrill of the chase, and drove the mare faster, waving his hat and yell-

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ing wildly, oblivious to all now but the immediate challenge of the race.

The buckskin refused to yield, and the contestants closed. It was neck and neck across the rough ground, each horse straining to outstrip the other. The one running for life and freedom, the other because it had been trained from birth to foil and frustrate creatures of its own kind, helping to enforce on them the will of a weak hairless creature called man.

McCORD was surprised to find the weary mare was up to it, and the thought crossed his mind that if she missed footing or stepped into a dog hole, he wouldn't have to worry about going back to the pen. Filled with strange elation, he drove the mare faster, beating at the buckskin with his hat.

The wing fence hove into view. McCord threw his weight against the reins, and veered off. But the buckskin smashed squarely into the camouflaged barrier.

McCord heard the crash — heard the scream of wire snapping taut against wood. He expected the fence to burst under the impact, the renegade buckskin to burst through it. But the barrier had been constructed to withstand just such shocks. Stretched wire snapped back. The buckskin was hurled fifteen feet through the air, backward, and struck the ground on its back, all its feet in the air.

The rest of the band thundered up. But these stragglers had been warned of the fence, and McCord was able to exploit their fear of the barrier and turn them without difficulty. He didn't look for the buckskin ever to get up off the earth. But it did so, shook itself violently, and turned to follow the others. Defeated at last. Not by McCord, but by the whole incomprehensible wizardry of man.

Then Hubbard came pounding up, and the plane was overhead, and it was no contest from there. The broomtails were well inside the wings of the trap, pointed in the proper direction, with no opportunity to turn. The pursuers had only to whoop them in, and within ten minutes the whole band was safely inside the trap, sides heaving, covered with muddy lather. Huddled together at the corral's far side. Looking at the men with frightened, questioning eyes. Trying to comprehend what had happened to them.

Somehow, inside the enclosure, they appeared more scrawny and misshapen than out on the open plain. More scrubby and contemptible. In some way, more pathetic. McCord did not look at them long.

Skin Hubbard secured the trap gate, and wiped his face on a blue figured bandana. McCord believed he ha dacquitted himself with distinction, and expected that the performance turned in would buttress his story of being a Kinkaid rider. But Skin Hubbard had no word of commendation.

"Not such a bad haul, after all," he commented sourly, eyes on the panting horses. "But I hate it like mischief, losing that stud."

The plane came to earth and taxied up. The pilot was out of it before the prop had stopped spinning, and was anchoring the craft to the fence with a length of stout rope. From where he sat, McCord could see on the plane's seat a 410-gauge shotgun pistol—the lethel, vicious firearm which the federal government had outlawed, restricting its use to peace officers and prison guards, and others who were licensed to kill.

McCord wondered whether the mustangers had a permit to possess such a weapon, and speculated what action would be possible, to dispossess them of it. Then he shrugged loosely.

Who would make trouble for them if they break a law? he asked himself silently. *You, McCord?*

He smiled cynically at the thought. These glamorous, mechanized horserunners were national celebrities. He was a fugitive with a price on his head.

"This is Mr. Morgan, Nails," Hubbard was saying. "He rides for Kinkaid—he says. Mr. Morgan, my pilot, Nails Wright."

The pilot looked up from his rope work, and nodded. And McCord didn't have to ask why they called him Nails. The pilot was small-boned and fleshless, with lantern jaw and cold, hooded eyes. He was nail-shaped, and seemingly as hard and nerveless as the strong stuff from which nails are fashioned.

"Morgan is going to be around till we

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get that wild bunch corraled," Hubbard went on. "We needed another hand."

And even though pilot and mustanger did not look at one another, McCord thought that something secret passed between them. What was it Kinkaid had said? *They'd both ship their mothers as canners, if they could turn a dollar by it.*

THE pilot ducked under a wing, and picked up the shotgun pistol. "I wish you'd let me use this persuader on that big white son," he said, ejecting an exploded shell and inserting a live one in the chamber. "We won't never get him, without I do."

"We'll use it tomorrow—if we have to," the mustanger promised. "I did want to ketch him whole-hided. But I'll waste just one more day on him, no more."

"What you aim to do with him?" McCord asked quietly, feeling that he must know.

"Ship him to the dog-food makers!" the horse-runner said vindictively. "He's been let run loose too long to ever do anything else with him."

"Then why in holy have you got to have him whole-hided?" the pilot wanted to know, his tone one of injury. "I'd like to burn his rump, just to see him switch his tail!"

"Well," the mustanger said thoughtfully, "I've been running the so-and-so for three-four years, off and on. He likely thinks he can't be had, unless I cripple him. I want him whole-hided, just to show him he ain't as rugged as he thinks he is. I expect you could call it a point of pride."

McCord ground his teeth, and looked away. A point of pride, the man said! Pride in running a horse like that to death with an airplane, to show that he didn't need to shoot him to bring him in! That was being sporting, all right. That was the like the laundry overseer, back at the pen. Knocked down by a con he had abused, the overseer had had the offender's arms pinioned, and had beaten him bloody with his fists—just, the overseer had said later, to show the convict who was the better man!

"Well," the horse-runner was saying, "we can't lallygag here all day. We got work to do."

It was work that McCord didn't relish: roping and throwing the captives, burning Hubbard's brand onto their sweat-caked hides. Pushing wires through the delicate, tender flesh of their nostrils and twisting the ends together, to shut off breathing.

But McCord was able to conceal his dislike of it, in the interest of furthering the fiction that he was a hardened range hand himself. Ranch-raised, he was gratified to discover that old skills had not left him. His sedentary muscles shrieked in protest against the unaccustomed strain and exertion, but he made them work anyhow, and took the lead in performing the bloody, dusty chores. And if he felt like the ultimate Quisling, assisting in the torture and ruin of fellow outcasts and fugitives, he had the comfort of knowing that treachery and cruelty were world-wide side products of fear like his own.

So he kept his eyes on the ball and played the game, and took a practical view of the suffering he could not have prevented anyhow. But when the captives had all been processed and moved into the holding pen, he saw several immature colt bodies scattered around, the flies already at them. And all at once the practical viewpoint was very difficult to sustain.

"The mares shouldn't ought to be run so hard this time of year," he declared, speaking slowly and distinctly. "Look at the premature colts that've been sloughed around here."

But the mustanger's laugh was scornful and complacent. "Horse-running is a business with me, mister. And this is the *time* of the year to run. Mares heavy with foal don't run as fast or as far as without. And I expect the world will worry along, without them jackrabbity colts. The sheep men want the bangtails off the desert, anyhow."

McCord said no more. He figured he had maybe said too much already. But he didn't trust himself to look at the mustanger again. He might start getting ideas.

HUBBARD had summed things up pretty fairly, anyhow. The fault, if fault it was, did not rest with the mustangers. It was all a part of a pattern of human selfishness and greed that transcended the horses and the men who ran them. The desert was

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public pasture, belonged to no man—and to all men. Yet certain individuals had appropriated it for their own private use, and these individuals had declared war to the death on the wild horse, simply because it could not be converted into dollars and cents on a big scale. That was the crime for which the wild horse had been condemned: It lived and ate government grass, and brought no profits to the men who governed the desert.

In one way of looking at things, McCord had been similarly condemned. McCord ate no grass, and he hadn't until this day trespassed on the desert. But he'd been regarded as a no-good and wastrel, and when the town banker had been found in his ransacked home with the back of his head bashed in, McCord had looked like the logical suspect. Before he'd got it through his head that they really believed him guilty, McCord had been tried and condemned, and committed to the penitentiary for the rest of his life. All because the town had wanted someone to be punished, and nobody with any drag gave a damn about McCord.

Me and them horses and ten million prairie dogs, McCord thought dismally.

IV

THEY washed the blood and dust from their hands and faces, in the brackish water of the trough in the corral, and walked down to the mustangers' camp. It wasn't much—a sheepherder's rubber-tired camp wagon, a storage tent with boarded-up sides, a battered half-ton truck, and a portable corral built for quick dismantling and transfer, a few bales of dry hay inside. But it was hidden cunningly in a fold in the hills, and McCord supposed that Hubbard's earlier reluctance to have him around stemmed from a desire to keep his camp site a secret.

Skin Hubbard prized his possessions, and was suspicious of the great mill race of men. From the campwagon, Hubbard produced a tin cup and a five gallon can full of tepid water. They each drank, and the mustanger

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opened his grub box, and he and the pilot fell to. McCord was not asked to join them, and—more to cover his embarrassment than because he was hungry—he opened the packet of sandwiches Kinkaid had put up for him.

The pilot and mustanger excluded him from their conversation, as from their food, and McCord sat apart on a flat-topped rock, chewing without relish, staring moodily into the brooding badlands. Something moved, out on a distant ridge, and McCord recognized the white stallion, staring back in the direction of the holding pen.

Why doesn't he make long tracks, while he can? McCord asked himself. *Why does he hang around and beg to be taken?*

But McCord knew why. McCord, too, had felt the terrible aloneness that follows separation from friends and companions and family. McCord had seen paroled convicts return to the pen and beg for admittance, after a month or two of strange, lonely freedom.

Hubbard stopped chewing suddenly, and spat out a mouthful of masticated food. "Look at that ornery mother's son!" he implored, gripped by a sudden excitement. "Just begging for us to come after him!"

Then the mustanger glanced at the sun, still high above the hills to the west, and began to put things hastily back into the grub box.

"You can feed your face tonight in town," he told the pilot. "We still got a couple hours sunlight left, and that animal has run a good eighty miles today. We're a-going to bring him!"

"Let me use that persuader on him," the pilot said complacently, "and I'll have him in here in thirty minutes."

"We won't need the persuader," the mustanger said, eyes glinting ravenously. I'll go up with you, this time. I'll show you how it's done!"

The mustanger locked the grub box with a huge padlock, against possible pilfering in his absence, and replaced it in the camp wagon. Then he drew his rifle from its boot, retied his horse to the corral fence, and set off at a hasty, hobbling walk, followed by the pilot.

"You can ride out to that gully where we hid on the first drive," he called to McCord across his shoulder, "and give us a lift if we need it."

Then he hurried on, and McCord sat motionless looking after him, hating him and not hating him, wishing that he did not have to witness the drama's end.

The plane was in the air again before he moved from the rock. He wanted to stay where he was—to hold aloof from the unfair contest, and let matters follow their course. But he felt a compulsion to hold what he'd won, and not excite the mustanger's resentment.

He would have to follow through.

He rode down past the holding pen and trap, and once more he refrained from looking squarely at the captives who watched him dumbly from the enclosure. It was too much like looking at the faces in the bull pen, when a new batch of "fish" came in. But, unlike those other faces, these seemed to accuse McCord of betraying them—of being personally to blame for their misery.

I had nothing to do with it, he told himself defensively. *That sort of thing has been going on a long time. I couldn't change it. My helping or not helping didn't make any difference. Besides, I got myself to look after. I can't go around feeling sorry for all the poor suckers in the world. I'm a poor sucker, too. And nobody feels sorry for me.*

But the sense of guilt wouldn't leave him. It didn't make sense, but he continued to feel himself a Judas, as long as the horses watched him.

"It all comes down to a matter of intelligence," he told the mare beneath him. "All the broomtails know, when they see trouble, is to run. That was my first notion, too, when I saw the plane. But if I *had* run, Hubbard would have stayed suspicious, and I'd be right where they are. I outsmarted Hubbard, and they didn't. I deserve to go free."

And he tried to believe his own words. But the thought persisted that without the help of Kinkaid, he would never have got this far. He had had a friend . . .

He heard the plane in the distance, and when he reached the dry wash, he had a ringside seat, from which to observe the effectiveness of the mustanger's new strategy. The stallion was still resisting. But the plane had its way with him, now. Whenever the horse would try to break for the desert,

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the rifle would kick dust geysers from the ground before it, turning it back toward the trap.

McCord in his youth had coursed coyotes in this fashion, from the ground. But McCord had never thought of horses as coyotes.

The stallion was now quite close. It was wet and muddy, and it staggered slightly in running. Its splendidly muscled chest was heaving, its eyes were red-rimmed and desperate. Its mouth was open, its tongue lolling out. But it was still the most magnificent creature McCord had ever seen.

Before it would enter the mouth of the funnel, the white horse whirled, and made one final, heart-breaking bid for freedom. But the relentless plane turned it back with ease. The stallion lowered its head and yielded at last. The show was over. The white stud could hold out against men and other horses, but not against the untiring machines of men.

And McCord saw suddenly that the white horse had made a much better fight of it than McCord had done. Beset by forces as purblind and oppressive as those that harried McCord, the stallion had stood its ground and fought the thing with such weapons as it had. It hadn't betrayed its kind and made a separate peace, to win individual advantage, as McCord had done.

The horse came nearer, and as McCord looked at it, a strange thing was happening in his mind. He was seeing the plane not as a man-made machine, but as the sum and embodiment of the forces against which he himself was pitted. He saw the stallion, not as another wild horse, but as himself, resisting a destiny that closed in upon him, inexorably. His lungs strained with the stallion's. He too was sweating, and his legs felt wooden and dead.

"They won't take me!" he shouted suddenly. And he kicked the mare up out of the wash, directly in front of the reeling stallion.

The white horse stopped, seeing the path ahead was blocked. It looked at McCord with lifted head, and McCord waved his hat at it, and drove the mare nearer.

"Go on," he yelled. "They haven't got us yet!" And he knew that he'd stay there all week, if necessary, to keep the white horse out of the trap.

The stallion turned, and the plane swooped down. McCord whooped wildly, and the stud broke into a run, refusing to heed the puffballs of dust that burst from the ground before it. The plane plunged down at it, overshot, and climbed again. At the crest of its upward swing, it hung motionless for an instant, in apparent indecision. Then it swooped downward again. Not at the fleeing stallion, as McCord had expected, but at McCord himself.

McCORD heard the motor's swelling roar, the whistling of the wind past propellor and wings. He saw faces through the plane's glass. He saw a gun barrel thrust out a window. It was the shotgun, not the rifle. He saw the cold blue eyes behind it.

McCord knew then that the chips were down, at last. The big blue chips, with the word *Life* stamped across their face. He knew then that the mustangers were aware of his identity, and had been all along. Otherwise, they wouldn't be trying to kill him, just over a horse. And he couldn't mistake the intent on the pinched bird-of-prey face behind the shotgun pistol.

But McCord was not now the fugitive resisting recapture. He was a man facing death. A man whose instinct told him it was better to live than to die. He was the white stallion, changed to a man, and given a fighting chance. The stallion with a friend named Kinkaid.

His pistol was in his hand, and he knew now that he would be able to pull the trigger. But it did seem futile. The stooping plane looked big as the near-by butte, and he thought for an instant it was going to crash into him. He ducked low as the shotgun spat death at him, and opened fire with the inadequate pistol, pulling the trigger again and again, stopping when the hammer snapped on an empty cylinder.

Just what happened thereafter he never would know of a surety. The movies to the contrary, it seemed unlikely that a pistol could down a plane—unless, perhaps, one slug by blind chance happened to find the pilot's head. More probably, he figured it later, the pilot tried to bank too close to the butte, and lost control of the craft. He had heard tales somewhere of vicious downdrafts that whipped around such sheer-sided

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abutments, hurling light aircraft to their doom.

But whether the credit was his, or whether the desert itself had taken a hand in affairs, the result was the same. The plane struck the butte head-on, and disintegrated in fiery debris. The sound of the explosion reverberated among the distant hills and mesas, then all was silent and tranquil, for all but a fire that roared on the ground at the base of the butte.

McCord sat a while as if stunned. Then he rode as near to the wreckage as the mare would permit. And there was no need to go nearer. The bodies already were unrecognizable, and it occurred to McCord then that no one would ever know what caused the crash. No one would ever even know that there had been a third party at the camp. McCord would free the trapped horses, the mustanger's own mount with them, and ride on, and the desert would keep his secret.

He found himself wishing he could remove the wires from the mustangs' noses. But he knew it would be an impossible project to attempt alone. Anyhow, the nostrils would fester, and the wires would slough off in time. Life would not be the most pleasant for the broomtails, in the meantime.

But life had not been overly pleasant at best. And the wild horses at least did not now face a forty-mile dry drive to the railroad, unable to breathe. They didn't face death in a dog food manufactory, somewhere on the coast.

"Stick around, old timer," he called to the white stallion who stood on top of a distant rise, watching affairs at the butte with considerable interest. "Your family will be with you, directly."

NIGHT was settling over the desert when McCord rode out of the mustanger's camp—water from the mustanger's can filling his canteen, food from the mustanger's guarded grub box filling his stomach and pack.

The sky to the west was crimson and gold, the buttes and mesas black against it, outlined in knife-sharp silhouette. The clouds to the east looked like blue cotton that deepened to black below—the hills and buttes receding into shadows like ships into fog.

The moment was one of incalculable sorcery, and McCord felt its impact to the very foundation of his soul. An infinitesimal speck in a wilderness of brooding space and stone, he felt an affinity with the wild horses he had saved from death, and with a coyote which yammered disconsolately from a distant ridge. An affinity with the desert itself. A part of the inscrutable mystery of its timeless and immeasurable space.

For McCord had had the will to kill that day. To destroy human life. McCord now could be considered guilty of an act for which he had been convicted five years before. It was as if a prolonged mystic rite had been consummated at last, a destiny fulfilled. And the accumulated bitterness of five years had fallen from him like a dead, dry skin. For the first time in all his years, McCord seemed able to guess at the meaning of life and of death, and rejoiced that he had been born.

Then he topped a rise, and came upon the horse band unexpectedly. The stallion screamed, seeing him. Screamed in greeting or defiance, and the wild triumph of the sound lifted the man's heart inexplicably.

Not understanding fully what had happened that day, not understanding that the tyrant-killers were dead and he had a friend—a friend like Kinkaid was to McCord—the weary pater-familias trotted stiffly around his mares, herding them together, nipping at them to move them away from what he could only comprehend as danger. The mares squealed and kicked humpily. But McCord wagered that they liked it, for all they pretended they did not. Females, the fugitive believed firmly, liked a broad-gauge boss who'd show his teeth once in a while.

He lifted a hand in farewell, and turned the mare northward again. He didn't know where he was going. But the desert was open before him, and from it he could communicate with Kinkaid, have his case reopened, prove his innocence. In the desert was strength to fight—which he had lacked before.

He rode slowly and sang softly, hope in his heart again.

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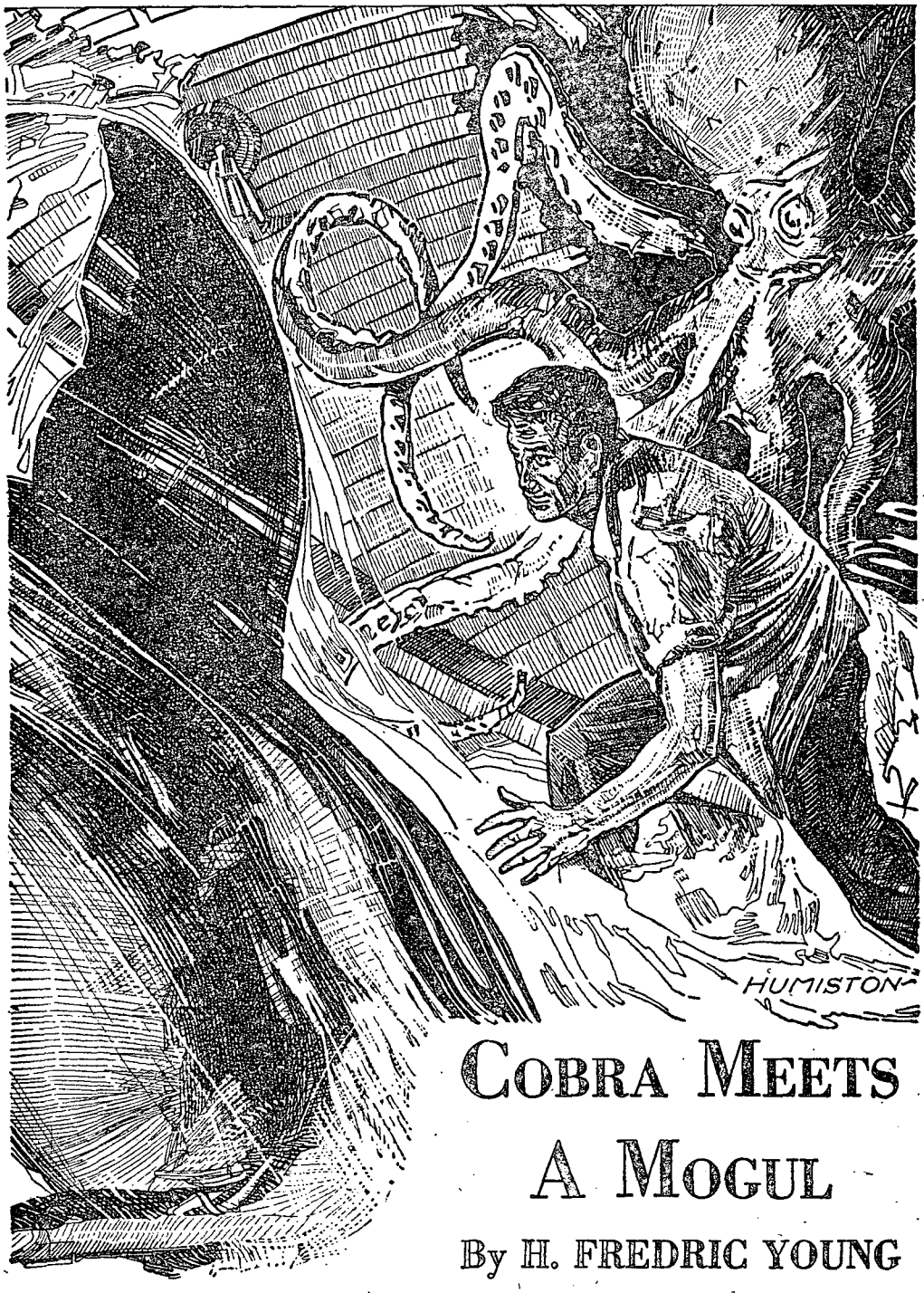
How Come a Torres Strait Lugger Off the Coast of California?



COBRA MEETS A MOGUL

By H. FREDRIC YOUNG

I WAS watching the air bubbles breaking into bluish froth fifty feet above Cobra Scott, while, from astern, came the splattering slosh of water as G. P. (Grover Paul Alexander), who was sprawled on the poop deck attired in bright-patterned swim trunks, was having one of the perspiring Kanaka deck boys wash him down with buckets of cool sea water. The *Kookaburra* bucked gently underfoot and I

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cursed sourly and thought of Cobra with a sopped sweat towel round his bullet head inside the helmet, and figured the big fellow had at last met his match in wits. Which served him right, as I'd pointed out, for straying so far from Torres Strait and Shark's Bay and all the rest of the grounds we knew so well. For nearly an hour now Cobra had been prowling the sea floor off Pt. San Eugenia, inspecting the flora and fauna for a likely spot to lower away the camera gear and power lights off the million-dollar barge. And I had my fingers tense on the salt-soaked handline waiting for the familiar jerk that might signal to hoist him deckward or, as the case might be, that something unexpected had fouled his lines. While the great G. P. groaned and smiled in his own comfort I mopped sweat from my face, and squinted nervously at the offshore sea.

Twelve years I'd been first mate for Cobra Scott, first one lugger and then another as fortune rose and fell away like the oceans, and this was the first time I was a mind to chuck the works and duck. Even though we were across the Pacific from Australia, for a quid I'd spit in Alexander's eye and stow away on the nearest tramp heading for the south seas.

I tightened my fingers on the handline, not depending entirely on the earphones clamped on Tahiti Sam's fuzzy head, and squinted seaward again. As we'd hove to into the protection of Pt. San Eugenia early that morning we'd sighted a four-foot dorsal curving out of a black and white piebald back, pacing the *Kookaburra,* a hundred yards off our port beam. It was killer whale, we knew, but there wasn't anything in particular we could do about that, seeing we was being paid according to contract and there was nothing I remembered in the text that stated we could haul up in case we sighted trouble. Up to now all the contracts Cobra and I had encountered were word of mouth—being bound by a handshake—so we felt considerably hidebound what with all the ambiguous writing we'd found in the one Cobra had signed with G. P. Alexander.

I glanced at Tahiti Sam, and he nodded that all was well with Cobra below. But I couldn't help worrying about this forty-foot killer we'd seen. I knew they seldom stray into the shallows unless hungry, but there was no way to gauge this one's appetite just watching his dorsal lazily cleave water. There was need for caution because a shark —even a blue-fin—is a sissy compared to this jackaroo, the killer whale.

And I remembered the publicity build-up they'd given Cobra and the lugger *Kookaburra* when we'd landed Stateside, and I had a hunch we were headed for trouble.

THIS pretty kid Marvella Talmage was half bent over the port rail, fascinated by the bursting shower of bubbles popping up from Cobra's exhaust valve. She was a wholesome, ever-smiling little bunny with the name Marvella Talmage strictly marquee-light cinema stuff, and a stone's throw out of character. She had half blushingly confessed to me, as we'd rounded the light out of Pedro, that her real name was Clarissa Ogden, and that she was from Bakersfield, California — Stateside — and that it was G. P. who'd lashed on the Marvella Talmage.

A few feet from Marvella stood young Steve Brooks, taking the swells with easy movements of his trained body, and if it was bubbles Steve was watching they must have been in the girl's twinkly eyes. Steve was an easy-going youngster, yet with a kind of dogged passion for perfectionism, which might've been a sound idea, at that, seeing he was stunt man doubling for Alexander in any action scenes. While the water kept sloshing under the poop deck canopy—Alexander was producer, director, and leading man, and there wasn't much about his appearance that could dispute any of his talents.

It was common talk Stateside that he was seldom anything short of genius. He had no sense of humor. He had no sentiment. As Cobra had said, he seemed to suffer greatly from the pains of new accomplishments gathered during thirty-eight years of taming the public and catering to dyspepsia, while fondling pretty starlets into brilliant stars.

My eyes turned automatically toward the clocks and the compressor gauge as I thought the handline gave a strange twitch, and I cocked an ear at the soft tunk-tunk-tunk—while Tahiti Sam nodded and peeled back his dark lips in a white-toothed grin that

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said all was well below. But I never ceased worrying when Cobra was below prowling strange waters. My canvas diving suit was stretched out on deck in case the unexpected happened, and my eyes ran along it and I sniffed the wind coming off the open sea trying, I suppose, to liken it to the Indian Ocean. Nothing seemed likely to happen until I saw Tahiti Sam's eyes bulge from his head as he yelped like a gigged bush pig.

"Cobree-ee-e! he's got killer-r whale!"

I took one jump and had the phones off Sam's head and on my own.

"Cobra!" I shrieked.

Cobra's half amused chuckle trickled up. "Don't worry—Jim. I got the jackaroo cornered."

"Stow the hero stuff, no one's watching you!" I yelled sourly. "Are you in the open?"

"I'm all right. I was inspecting a rock grotto when this hungry chum nosed against the two-foot entrance. He can't get at me."

I said, "How're your lines?" I heard him sigh carefully.

"M'boy, your guess is as good as mine. He's battering his head against the entrance now—wistful looking chum, he is. Are there any seals up there in sight?"

I twisted my neck and glanced shoreward. "There's a herd on the bench."

"Maneuver 'em out to sea if you can," Cobra instructed. "When this devil comes up to take a blow, maybe he'll see them and forget me."

I ordered everyone below, then yelled for the native boys to man the skiff. The boy showering off G. P. came tumbling off the poop deck and in a few moments him and Tahiti Sam were rowing like made toward shore. Their speed could be accounted for not so much for Cobra's sake as for the fact of a killer whale's penchant for small boats.

They had the seals off the rocks and headed well into deep water when I saw the killer break water in a foaming blast of whitish mist. The seals and the killer sighted each other at about the same time. But the killer was between the herd and the shoreline rocks, so the seals had no way to turn but toward the open sea, with the killer whale frothing in their wake.

I yelled into the phone. "Kick off your weights and shoot up, Cobra—"

Cobra disregarded the caution to rise no faster than his bubbles, inflating swiftly and shooting surfaceward. And the inshore current veered him into the *Kookaburra* as he popped up, banging his helmet into the oak hull, knocking him cold.

Steven and Marvella were alongside me to help drag Cobra on deck, where I yanked off his helmet and tossed aside his sweat towel and worked on him several minutes.

When he came to I handed him half a dozen aspirin, and he sat there munching on the aspirin and grinning weakly and shaking his head.

A shadow fell across us and I glanced up. G. P. stood there in fresh duck trousers and green silk sport shirt and a hurt expression in his eyes. "You should have sent down a camera," he complained. "I doubt if we will have the opportunity again for a shot like that."

I stiffened and lunged a step toward G. P., because what was Cobra's affair was mine.

"Hold it!" Cobra said. He grinned amiably and got to his feet. "We'll do our very best, Mister Alexander, to give a repeat performance for the cameras—"

Which we did.

I SPUN away from Alexander and stalked sullenly into the wheelhouse, thinking of that morning in Broome. Cobra and I had been seated at a corner table in Gig Waller's place, sipping at gin pahits and swatting at the innumerable insects buzzing round our heads. I had been half sore at Cobra, seeing he'd lost his wad the night before to a planter from New Guinea.

"You might've tried poker instead of high-spading," I had grumbled, and then I had seen G. P. coming thorugh the door from the hotel lobby.

"Cobra," I had said, "something tells me that new chum is looking for you. I got a hunch that we'd be ahead of the game if we ducked him and mooched a stake from some of the boys and hit the pearling grounds. One good stone and—"

My hunch was not a brilliant deduction of sorts. But it was a fact that about the first thing a new chum to Broome did was look

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up Cobra Scott. Sometimes it was the mere curiosity of seeing him. Sometimes maybe it'd be someone in search of a soul dear to them who'd vanished into the Never-Never of the bush country. Or—as in the case of Alexander—they'd traveled across oceans and continents for Cobra's expert help.

Alexander had moved up to the bar and said something to Waller, and Gig had pointed our way.

Alexander had a tapered build that wasn't hurt by his expensively tailored pongee suit. A cork jungle helmet covered his head, and it couldn't help but have a raking slant, but the downunder sun had done some damage to his neck, which was burnt and peeled a boiled-shrimp pink.

"The barman was kind enough to tell me one of you gentlemen is the famous Cobra Scott."

Cobra had squinted under half sleepy lids, but waved his gin pahit cordially and indicated an empty chair. "That'd be me, Mister—" And I had seen Cobra's neck bulge some under his small ears while his gray eyes squinted shrewdly at a slight bulge on the breast of the other's pongee coat, about the spot where a man should keep his coat wallet. "Have a seat Mister—it's never wise to exert yourself downunder any more than is necessary."

"Thank you, Mister Scott. With your permission I will introduce myself. My name is G. P. Alexander. I represent Delpont Adventure Pictures, Inc. Hollywood, y'know. That's where—well, gentlemen, this may sound quite self-conceited, but common gossip has it that I'm probably the greatest living genius in cinema-craft today."

"Hollywood?" Cobra had frowned perplexedly and rubbed his thatch of reddish hair.

"California! United States!" Alexander had said.

"Oh, quite!" I had gagged holding my glass and gulping, while Cobra deftly tossed off the balance of his pahit as if to sharpen his memory—or perhaps his wits. "Sure. Oh, Waller! Mix one of your best for Mister Alexander—what'll it be, sir? Pahit?"

G. P.—as he said he preferred to be called—had nodded, removed a linen kerchief from his breast pocket and patted his moist forehead.

Cobra had leaned his weight back in his chair making it squeak. I saw a small muscle in his temple quiver as he again eyed the bulge in the other's immaculate coat.

"Well, sir—" Cobra had remarked, half yawning and fanning at insects with his free hand, "you seem to've come a long way to see me."

ALEXANDER had again dabbed at his forehead with the linen kerchief. He had a well-molded face with a thin mustache and a row of perfect teeth when he smiled modestly. "Your reputation seems to have no bounds, Mister Scott; it brought me personally across the ocean. We spare no expense in Hollywood to bring the genuine article to our audience. Seems like when the armed forces were fighting for their lives in the Philippines, your name became a sort of byword with the American boys when it came to dead Japanese."

"I had some luck along those lines," Cobra had freely admitted.

G. P. had continued. "To be brief, Mister Scott—Delpont Adventure Pictures, Inc., is planning a super-gigantic deep sea epic and needs your expert assistance."

Cobra had grinned and gulped at his gin pahit with his eyes blinking at each swallow, then had lowered his glass and swiped at the half amused grin on his mouth with the back of one hand.

"My assistance—or my reputation?" Cobra banged his glass for a refill.

G. P. obviously had not been expecting Cobra to call his shot so accurately. He squirmed, but smilingly. "Well, of course, there will be a certain amount of publicity, Mister Scott."

"Cobra'll do. So?"

G. P. had rubbed his soft hands together then passed one hand across his sleek, black hair. "I am prepared to make you an offer to bring your famous lugger *Kookaburra* to to the United States. We plan to use it, and yourself and crew, in this picture. Er—we have been so bold as to tentatively arrange passports and a contract which protects you in every way. The contract calls for fifty dollars a day for you and your boat, Mister Scott—pardon me, Cobra—and five dollars a day to each of your crew. The actual work will be done off the coast of Lower Cali-

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fornia. The studio will pay all the operating costs of your boat, such as fuel—"

Alexander had gone on for about fifteen minutes and finally removed a bulk of papers from the inside pocket of his coat, which proved to be several copies of the contract he'd spoken of.

"I admit the whole thing sounds like an interesting proposition, Mister Alexander." Cobra had thumbed through the contract several times, then grinned up at the other. "Looks pretty legal to a man accustomed to a word and a handshake to bind any sort of agreement." Cobra had then turned and squinted my way. "What d'ya think, Jim?" I started to voice an objection based upon my first instinctive distrust of G. P. Cobra had shifted in his chair and mashed my toe with his heel. "Good, Jim—where do I sign, Mister Alexander?"

Which is why a few weeks later the lugger was easing into the harbor at Pedro, while G. P. had flown back by clipper to get matters arranged.

MY FIRST impression of Hollywood had been that everyone was a millionaire. I wondered vaguely if they'd deliberately made the town over especially for Cobra Scott. They chucked money away so fast I wasn't long in realizing the contract wadded in Cobra's hind pocket was fish-bait in a big swim. But Cobra went through all the preliminary matters without turning a hair, and I began to figure maybe the glamor was worth the licking we were all taking in pay.

We had left the *Kookaburra* docked at Pedro in charge of our two native deck hands—who were half afraid to venture ashore—while Cobra and me toured the country in the back seat of an expensive limousine with a liveried chauffeur to open and close the door for us. I didn't like it, and I made that fact plain to Cobra.

"Yes, Jim," he admitted dourly, "we've been done in."

"I wouldn't be surprised," I growled. "What's happened now?"

"It ain't what's happened now, Jim. It's what took place back in Broome. That bloody contract I signed."

I remembered how far we were from home, and the prospects of junking the *Kookaburra* and working passage home on a tramp made my stomach tighten into a knot. "You mean it's no good!" I half yelled.

"On the contrary, Jim, it's good as gold. And that's just what's fouled things up. It's binding. But it calls for peanuts. I've been keeping an ear cocked as we were in and out of the studio. We're being paid fifty dollars American a day for me and the lugger, and five each for the crew. Why, I understand the janitors in these places own private yachts—we should be getting ten times what we are!" His frown had deepened into a scowl, but I saw a smile working at his mouth corners, and though I never tried to guess what was going on inside his head, I imagined it was something like the time the Jap lugger pirated a load of copra off the *Kookaburra.* It turned out that somehow the copra in the Jap's hold got wet, which is the best way I know to set a boat afire, which happened of course. The burnt corpses of the eight Japs bobbing in a shallow lagoon made me sick, but to Cobra it was vastly amusing.

It was while Alexander had been dickering to hire a tug to tow the barge to location that the trick fell into Cobra's lap.

It was a sea-going barge bulging with cinema apparatus, and everything was controlled by a huge set of storage batteries. It was without its own power to eliminate the chance of fire, and I'd heard gossip that it was a million dollar layout.

"Mister Alexander," Cobra had suggested, "as long as you've hired the *Kookaburra,* why not just let her earn wages? Why, you're spending money for an extra tug when all we got to do is lash that barge to the *Kookaburra* and there's extra money in your pocket."

I could see that Cobra's suggestion had its effect on G. P.

"You're making a helluva extra job for the crew," I said sourly. It was going to take a twenty-four hour watch, towing that barge. "If I was within swimming distance of 'Stralia, I'd duck." I scowled at Alexander. "You're getting us for the price of cod-bait as it stands, Mister," I snarled and glared at him some more.

"It was your captain's suggestion, not mine," G. P. said airily.

"M'boy!" Cobra snapped. "Remember

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to keep your lip buttoned when you're in the presence of an important man like G. P. If you'll excuse him, sir. Jim often forgets his position as first mate." He whirled on me again. "Dammit! You heard me say we're towing the barge! Break out the eight-inch hawser!"

Other than that, I was bounced out of my midship quarters and moved into the fo'c's'le peak with the deck hands. My room was turned over to this little bunny, Marvella Talmage, and her personal maid, while Cobra vacated his quarters in favor of G. P. We cleaned out the rope locker aft for Cobra and Steve Brooks. Quarters aboard the sea-going barge housed the technicians.

ON THE slow trip south it became obvious that G. P. was going to have trouble with his impulse to fondle Marvella. She avoided him in a nice way, but he was the big-shot in charge of everything—even life and death from the way the rest of the troupe held him in awe—and you know how a thing like that goes. G. P. kept passing off these sly approaches to Marvella as merely one artist's interest in another, but as it happened, I guess he was only kidding himself.

"Cobra," I stated one morning, and I was boiling mad. "This G. P. is not only a slick crook, he's a fair cow of a heel, too. He's doing his best to take this kid for a ride when anyone can see it's plain as hell she's gone for Steve."

Cobra was chewing on an unlighted cigarette which was sopped nearly to its tip. "Jim," he said dreamily, "I was never a man to stick my nose in other people's business. You c'n never tell about a man like G. P. He's a big man in the industry—I think the correct term is mogul over here. Who knows. Someday even a mogul may learn his lesson." I started to question him further, but the look on his face was ominous, so I whirled away grumbling and squinted at the hawser trailing astern.

WITHIN a week we were too occupied searching for suitable undersea locations for some deep shots to do much quibbling about G. P. and the contract. That business is what led to Cobra's narrow squeak with the killer whale fifty foot below in the rock grotto. When he finally managed to squeeze himself around a fifth of gin, blinking owlishly as he gulped, he described the spot in detail to G. P. It seemed to fit the bill exactly, so we spent a couple days shooting scenes of Cobra in and out of the grotto—but of course he was doubling for G. P.

We had a few distant glimpses of the four-foot dorsal, but always at a respectable distance, so we figured we had luck on our side. So when the time arrived to shift location to an old wrecked windjammer down coast a few miles, the killer whale was only a matter of idle scuttlebutt.

It was evening with the ocean nearly glass smooth, and the moon putting shifty floss all across the waters, and I was alone in the wheelhouse, having taken the eight to midnight watch. G. P., I knew, was down in his cabin sipping expensive liquors, and everyone else was below deck except the two figures leaning against the rail astern. I twisted for a glance at them, and saw them swaying easily with the movements of the lugger as we rolled along at about seven knots.

It was Marvella and Steve, and I felt good when Steve curled an arm around her, and then I saw him kiss her. It was the first time I'd seen this kind of stuff—in a nice way, that is—and I was enjoying it to the hilt when all of a sudden the back of my neck tingled. Alexander was on deck, and I thought he seemed a little drunk, or it could've been the slow lurching of the boat, at that.

He swayed past the wheelhouse, staggering heavily against the port rail as a swell lifted the *Kookaburra* and set her down a bit sharply. I had a sudden inspiration. As the next swell slopped under the bow I twisted the wheel sharply causing the lugger to groan painfully and snap into a side-lurching roll. But it wasn't any good as G. P. caught his balance as he hung half across the rail, clutching frantically with both hands. I saw him come upright, turn and glower my way. There was no light inside the wheelhouse, and he couldn't see how I was grinning all over my face. And then I wiped off the grin, because Cobra had jumped through the doorway, cursing low in his throat.

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"You crazy jackaroo!" he said hoarsely. "That chum has got Santa Claus whiskers all over his face and you're doing your damndest to make shark-bait of him!"

"In Stateside pidgin," I snapped, "he's a bloody heel of the worst rank. Watch him Cobra—he's on his way back to break up matters between those kids.

Cobra turned and looked astern; I heard him spit softly into the dark. "Nature has a strange way of dealing with matters that concern nature, Jim," he said softly.

I didn't quite savvy his angle until some moments later.

Alexander kept lurching astern, until finally he was facing Steve and Marvella. There seemed to be some talk, then Steve was suddenly spraddle-legged with his shoulders pumping, and it was a few moments before I had a glimpse of G. P. again.

"You see, Jim, nature is devilish to savvy." And I saw his big shoulders bouncing up and down, and one hand was on his mouth trying to muffle his amusement.

I spun round momentarily to put the lugger back on the course, and when I turned back I saw Alexander rocking on his feet and holding his jaw. Then he whirled and went below.

WE SIGHTED the wreck next day about mid-morning. It was the remains of an old windjammer that was half capsized in a small lagoon. She may have once enjoyed quite a reputation, but no one seemed to recall her history. She had a hole stove in her hull at the water line, which may have been the disaster that sent her aground.

G. P. said it was the perfect cache for hidden loot in his picture. I soon learned that you never lay a quid on what a movie is going to be until they get it all on film. This next scene was to be the ending of the picture—the climactic something or other, G. P. said—and what with the filming barely started they were ready for the final scene. I didn't get it. Not that it mattered.

What concerned me was Alexander's face. I had glimpsed Steve's, and it showed no sign of bruises, so I had the idea last night's affair had been lopsided. I was disappointed when G. P. appeared on deck. He was dressed in a swashbuckling costume, all blue with red stripes and red epaulets on his shoulders and shiny brass buttons all over the coat, with polished leather boots reaching half to his knees. But there wasn't a sign of Steve's knuckles, which I later learned had been done over by the makeup man, and again, there you are—which only made me remember anew what a slick cuss we'd cobbled on to that morning in Broome.

They made some shots of Marvella and G. P. aboard the lugger. They were supposed to be taking off in a skiff for the wrecked windjammer, though as near as G. P. got to water was a step or two down a rope ladder toward the skiff. From that point on it was going to be Steve dubbing in for G. P.

We'd eaten lunch, and everyone was lying around relaxing, when Cobra called me into the wheelhouse.

"Take a look at the glass, Jim," he said. "I don't like it."

For a fact, Cobra wasn't kidding. The needle had sunk several degrees.

I said, "S'pose we better advise G. P. to haul everything into port until it blows over?" I glanced at the sky. It was clear and blue. But as Cobra pointed out, this was strange country, and not like Torres Strait. "How long do you think it'll be before any hard wind breaks?"

He stared southwestward and shrugged. "If we were around Shark's Bay, I'd say she might stand four, five hours away. As it is—" He shrugged and squinted at the barge lying a hundred feet away. "We better keep it quiet for a while, Jim. I understand, with any luck, the shooting will be completed this afternoon."

He walked away and I watched with interest from the wheelhouse.

I had to hand it to G. P. He seemed to know exactly what he was about. Steve and Marvella were out in the skiff, with a long range camera on the barge following them. The lugger was holding a taut towline on the barge while Steve—doubling for G. P.—expertly rowed the skiff across the two hundred feet of water to the wreck.

"Cobree-e-e-e!" It was Tahiti Sam whom we'd put up in the rigging to keep a lookout for possible trouble.

I watched Cobra go rigid, and his neck

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swelled to a hood under his ears, which was mainly why he was called Cobra.

"The killer whale he head this way—" Sam was like a brown monkey in the rigging.

Cobra leaped up on the rail, steadying himself with one hand against the rigging. "Steve! Steve!" he thundered out. "Turn around—head back to the lugger!"

The air was tense with excitement and everyone aboard started racing somewhere. I yelled them to a standstill. G. P. sprinted past me and was against the rail yelling at the top of his lungs, and waving at the skiff.

"Keep rowing for the wreck, you fool, Brooks! Keep rowing! You're trying to ruin the greatest action shot in the history of pictures. You blithering idot, Brooks—back—keep heading away!"

I was grateful that Cobra's attention was riveted on the skiff. I made a running jump and hit the back of G. P's. knees with my doubled back. We rolled across deck in a tangled mass, with G. P. screeching furiously. I kicked loose and scrambled to my feet. I sighed easily, seeing that Steve was following Cobra's commands, rowing back to the lugger like a madman.

Then I had my first glimpse of the dorsal. Only it wasn't the four-foot one we'd seen before.

"It's a six-foot dorsal at least!" I yelled shakily to Cobra. "The devil must be fifty feet—"

Water spewed in a blue conical cloud as the brute broke surface a hundred and fifty feet away. My eyes jerked toward the skiff. I saw Marvella hunched in the stern, and Steve half aslant on stiff, braced legs, his arms whipping at the short oars. And it was plain by now who was going to win the race.

G. P. began jumping up and down in anger, and I could've sworn there was froth bubbles emerging from his lips. Then I made a choked yell at Cobra.

"For God's sake, don't do it—"

But he'd kicked off his sneakers and was hurtling across the rail in a flat, long dive. Then his bull head and shoulders smacked the water, and he reappeared flailing his arms in low, powerful strokes.

There was less than a hundred feet separating the killer whale and the skiff. I gritted out a prayer and watched Cobra's swimming figure cutting diagonally now behind the skiff.

A whining head of wind dropped down from nowhere to dig the water, making it boil and froth momentarily.

The screaming aboard the lugger and the barge made a chattering din. There was a long, white, boiling wake behind the killer as spray whorled away from Steve's oars. I sensed the skiff banging into the *Kookaburra's* hull, and from an eye-corner saw hands lifting the pair onto deck.

About all I could see of Cobra was the back of his feet beating frantically at the water. The killer whale had long ago sighted this easier prey, and I watched glumly as the big dappled hulk cut water like a power launch.

"Faster!" I screamed after Cobra, though I knew he couldn't possibly hear me. It was a race between man and whale. Tahiti Sam was turning flipflops in the rigging above.

There was another stray gust of wind to splatter the water surface again. That moment gave Cobra the edge he needed. He vanished momentarily, the whale swerved confusedly, and when next I had sight of Cobra he was pawing his way through the hole in the windjammer hulk.

I thundered at the Kanaki deck hands to chop away the hauser. In less than a minute we had the *Kookaburra* free and under full power.

I heard a cracking roar bouncing across the water, and lunged round to see the killer whale battering into the hulk. The whole structure shuddered and swayed. I punched blindly at the throttle with the butt of one hand. I yelled again because Cobra had shot out of the hole as if he'd been gunned. Then the whale was charging in wide circle. As I came in toward the hulk maneuvered back again, and Cobra again came hurtling into the open. Then I felt the lugger lurching ahead and slewing in a short arc to starboard. I spun the helm—

I shot another glance at the hulk, and there was Cobra scrambling back inside to safety, then the whacking sound as the killer rammed headlong after him.

Again Cobra squirted into the open. I

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didn't have time to figure what he was doing, whether it was grandstand play to give the folks a taste of the south seas, or whether he was giving G. P. a chance to shoot some real action.

I came at the whale full speed, swerving sharply and taking the brute full broadside as he was backing off for another try at Cobra. The whale was thrown bodily half clear of water by the impact of the lugger. And the *Kookaburra* danced crazily into a heavy slew, dipping under the aft rail and I grappled the helm and had her bucking in a wide circle. As I came in toward the bulk I jammed her into reverse and hand-butted the throttle, throwing her sidewise. Then I heard the yell, "Got Cobree-e-e!" from the Kanaki boy. I gunned full speed ahead and we cleared away with Cobra standing on deck shaking the water off him.

The killer whale, half stunned, was limping seaward, flipping his huge tail angrily.

Cobra swayed into the wheelhouse and began gulping at the gin bottle. His eyes blinked owlishly as he swallowed, and then as though remembering something important he bent and squinted at the glass. I saw his mouth working grimly. He whirled and yelled for G. P.

"We gotta shove outa here," Cobra yelled hoarsely. "Take a look at the glass, Mister—things are boiling up for a hard blow. We better make some port until it's over." He took another drag from the gin bottle.

I saw G. P. lift his arms in protest. "We can't—I've got to finish shooting this last scene."

"I'm skipper of this craft, Mister," Cobra said quietly, "and my word is the law. I say we pick the boys off the barge and make a run for it." He bent toward the glass, cursing bleakly.

I glanced at the clear skies and was bringing the lugger in toward the barge.

Suddenly the impact seemed to hit G. P. He was purple-faced and momentarily speechless. "You can't do that!" he shouted. "We'll have to tow the barge in with us. That's a million dollar investment—it would founder in a storm!"

I saw a muscle quiver in Cobra's temple, and he took a cigarette I handed him and jammed it in his lips and began calmly chewing.

"Towing fee will be a thousand dollars a day, Mister Alexander," he stated matter-of-factly.

I chuckled and looked at G. P's. lobster red face.

"You—you can't do that. Your contract!"

"Doesn't say a word about towing," Cobra said. "I've had a Hollywood lawyer read it through. My fee for towing is one thousand dollars a day, and going up every minute." He turned to me. "Give me that contract from my desk, Jim. I had the lawyer draw it up before we left Hollywood. Have you a pen, Mister Alexander?"

I reached for my pen, but G. P. was clawing one out of his pocket with one hand, mopping his forehead with the other, while his troubled eyes stared frantically at a small white cloud coasting along the horizon.

"I'VE known you many a year Cobra—" I said. Catalina Island was fading behind, and on the stern were two figures all wrapped up in each other. It was Steve and Marvella heading for a honeymoon at Cobra's expense.

"What's what?" Cobra said, coming out of a half dream.

"That grandstand stuff when the killer whale was coming at you. You were ducking in and out of that wreck like a cinema hero. You might've got hurt showing the folks what a brave man you are."

Cobra massaged his palms together, and he didn't crack a smile. "Why, Jim, what would you've done in a spot like that. Y'see, there was an octopus in there."

I stared at him, grinning. I glanced at the blue sky, and my eyes dropped to look at the glass. I didn't like it, and I started to thump it with my finger. "That thing's crazy," I muttered. "If it keeps acting up we'll be in a heavy rain right here in the middle of sunshine."

"Oh!" Cobra said, and his amiable chuckle was rumbling in his chest. "I'll take that below to the work shop, Jim. I got a hunch it needs repairing. Might even find some sort of a magnetic mechanism inside that throws it off."

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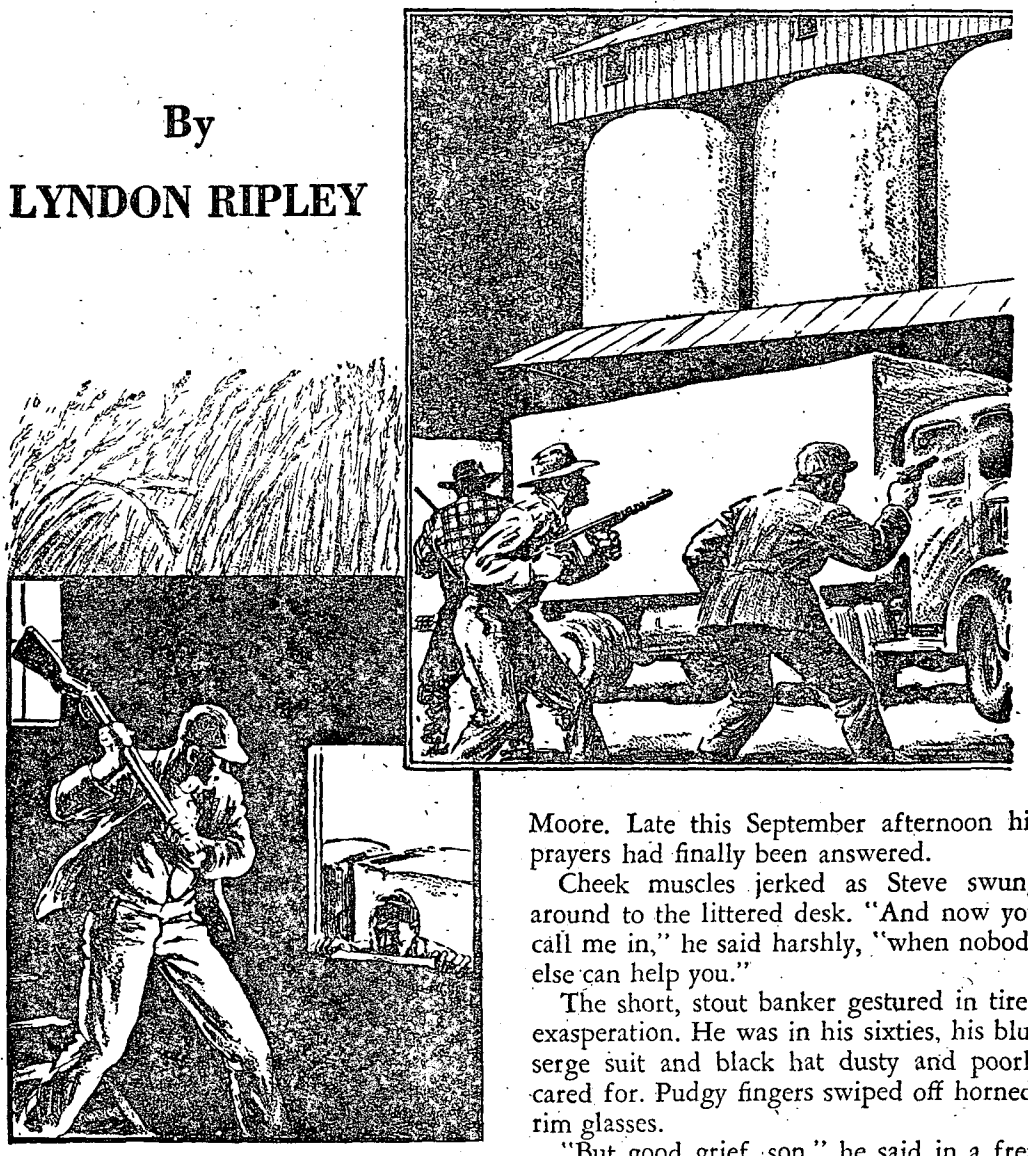
WHEAT JOCKEY

By

LYNDON RIPLEY



BIG Steve Connor leaned against the bank window sill. Gray-green eyes stared out at shadowed Montana foothills under lettering, that read from outside, "Durango Trust And Savings Bank." Yes, Fate had been kind. For a long time now he had hoped desperately, sometimes savagely, that he could tangle again with old Lucius Moore. Late this September afternoon his prayers had finally been answered.

Cheek muscles jerked as Steve swung around to the littered desk. "And now you call me in," he said harshly, "when nobody else can help you."

The short, stout banker gestured in tired exasperation. He was in his sixties, his blue serge suit and black hat dusty and poorly cared for. Pudgy fingers swiped off horned-rim glasses.

"But good grief, son," he said in a fretful, dry tone, "I financed you all through the dry years. Your debt has been cleaned."

Steve's burnt orange brows knitted. There was a cynical twist to his ordinarily good-humored mouth as he said evenly. "Certainly my debt was cleaned. So was I. Your foreclosure took care of that."

"I know, I know, Steve, but somebody had to hold your paper."

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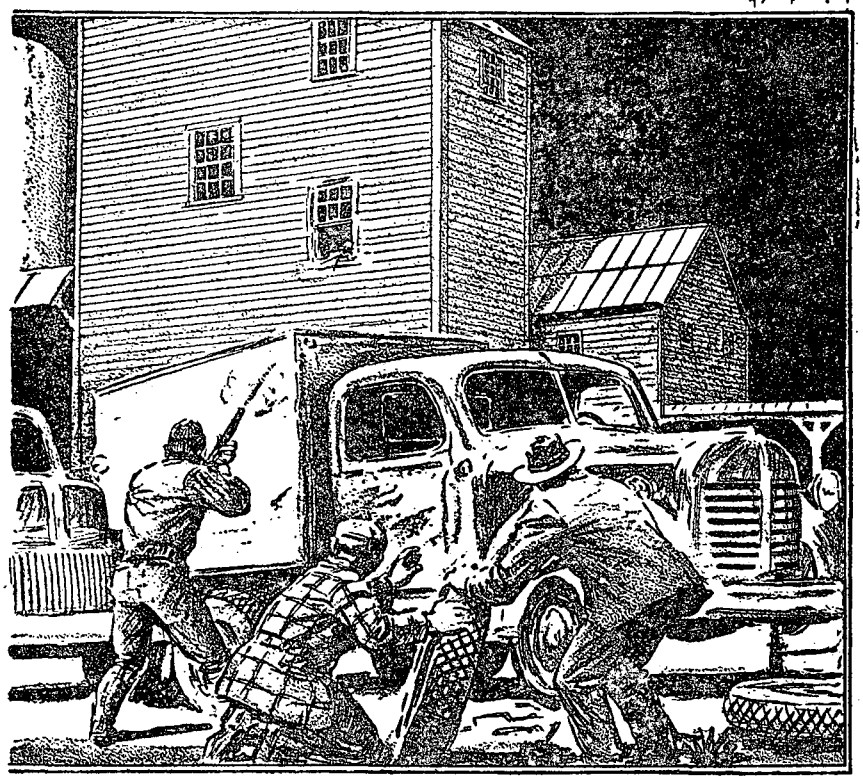
And These Wheatleggers Were Certainly All Nerve!



Steve thumbed back the poplin hat, flicked a lock of faded chestnut hair out of his eyes.

"Start further back," he urged. "How come you let Rod Rocco pass up my homestead with his combine? You've never said. He cut and threshed wheat for everybody around Durango. But not me. He's another chiseler I've begged the Almighty I might have reason to meet again. Isn't your conscience a trifle warped?"

"I don't blame you for feeling as you do," Moore said, looking up, sighing deeply. "I swear I don't. I can see your point, losing all you had. But look at my side of it. All the farmers around these parts blamed you for Sid Crawford's death. Maybe they didn't tell you, but they did. You were running the combine at the time, weren't you? While Rod was away, lining up fields to work over. Can you blame them for having been resentful? Making you wait till every bit of their acreage had been processed?"

"Didn't you know that Crawford was a wineo," Steve flung back heatedly," and half crocked at the time? Rocco had given him plenty. Crawford walked right into the works. And then, afterward, before Rocco decided to circle back to my place, it rained. That heavy fall rain. What the rain didn' ruin the night winds flattened while heavy wet. After owing you for the dry years it was the kissoff."

"I suppose you never will believe I had to take your place, after you disgustedly walked out," Moore said, shaking his head. "I tried to salvage what assets there were. I had to have your summer fallow disked, dragged and seeded. Later on I rented the place to Alf Rocco; Rod's hard-working brother made good."

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"Maybe Alf did. He's smaller than Rod but he's a man. He works for a living."

"We aren't getting anywhere this way," Moore said, swinging his chair, raising his voice. "I'm sorry about it all but we can't change it. I didn't phone you to come to Durango just to argue. As I said, a thousand dollars are yours if you fix the hoist and meet the loading schedule."

"Loading your ancient elevator must be terribly important," Steve said slowly, beginning to enjoy the flavor of gall-dipped words. "Unusually so when you let down and call me in. What a laugh. What's the rush?"

"I've got to get the elevator loaded and four freight cars filled. It's got to be finished by Friday noon. A wheat train is making up at Coulee Junction, this side of Wheatland Falls. It's grain for Europe."

"And this is Monday. Too bad. Doesn't give much time. What's the matter with the hoist?"

"It doesn't work at all. It's the same cup apparatus you built, the same motor you installed. You did a fine job. It has run very well until this summer. I've had two different mechanics working on it. Ward Slawson came and looked it over but he's so infernally busy he couldn't do much. You know him. Had a homestead, too, north of your place."

"Of course I know him. He's an airplane mechanic now with Northwest Airlines. He's gone to the top while I've grubbed a living repairing busses in The Falls. I've been trying to save a little dough to buy field contracting equipment. You know as well as I do that wheat is golden right now and will be for some time."

"Certainly, son, I know that. That's the reason for the thousand. I want to give you a boost. I'll pay when the wheat is sold."

"When the wheat is sold!" Steve snorted. "You get your wheat and make me wait like you did before. You sure have a lot of crust. Appealing for help to a washed-up ex-homesteader. You think I'll drop the only job I've got to come and fix a lift unit that somebody else has completely balled up!"

"But it's an emergency, son, can't you see that?" Moore protested. "Alf Rocco, Shorty O'Keefe, Weller Davis and the rest have been here a dozen times to unload. Threshing was early this year. Now's the time to sell. They owe me plenty and want to pay off."

"And all you want me to do is unload the growers' trucks, fill your granary and measure out precious kernels to box cars. All in the name of starving Europeans. But what's the real reason? Come on, give. Confide to a has-been."

"I wish you wouldn't be so antagonistic, Steve," Moore complained. "I'm ruined if I don't make this train. I'm land poor. There have been taxes, lower interest rates, a great deal of sickness. I've had to foreclose a lot of places, then run them. It took plenty of financing until this year when wheat leaped from one-twenty-two to three-ten. It's my only out, I tell you. I've simply got to cash in."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Steve said, sharp gaze sardonic. "You say you'll pay a grand, then if I kick through?"

"I'll pay gladly the minute I'm paid."

STEVE shoved away from the wall as he stuck his hands into the pockets of his brown wool jacket. Old Luce showed no bombastic now, for he was cornered. Let him suffer. Let him grovel like a pinned-down spider.

"I want to be sure," Steve said slowly. "You'll pay a thousand then?"

"I will. I told you—"

"Well," Steve drawled, lengthening the precious moment, "I might see you loaded providing you make it five thousand bucks. Not a dime less. Knowing your penny-pinching habits I guess that about stops the deal and ends the interview."

Eyes locked and held for long seconds. Banker Moore's tortured gaze dropped first. He brought a rasping sigh from deep down.

"Very well then," he said in resignation. "I see you must have your pound of flesh. I'll pay five thousand. I won't be able to meet my obligations at your figure but at least I can help those who trust me to meet theirs. They can't haul to Wheatland Falls on the steep mountain grades. Fortunately Melanie has a good job here, teaching school, if I go under."

The name "Melanie" sounded like a

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lovely musical chord. Steve tore it loose from his eardrums and made it jangle.

He glanced out the window again, finding it hard to realize that long months of sullen hoping had finally yielded bitter fruit. He was now master of Old Moore's destiny.

But as he stood there, with the reins of tart victory in his strong grasp, there was no deeply satisfying exultation, no balm for peace of mind. He steeled himself to hold on. At least he could make Moore pay dearly, blast his soul, if that would help any.

"So Friday noon is the deadline?" he asked coldly, moving toward the door.

"That's right, Steve. It's the last chance to ship before winter closes in. It's due early this year by all indications."

"Okay. I'll make some arrangements with the bus company and bring my tools. I didn't come prepared to play any Sir Galahad this trip. I'll be back in the morning."

"Very well. Here's a key to let you in. Go ahead and fix things right. I won't bother you. It's entirely in your hands."

Steve nodded and took the key. He turned and started out, toward his ramshackled Ford coupe at the curb. Then he swung back.

"We might as well get this straight," he said in an even, ominous tone. "I'll do my level best but I don't promise one blasted thing."

Moore took off his battered hat and scratched the bald pate above a white fringe. "I understand. No man can do more than that. I'll get word around to give you a day at it, then start hauling. It will be touch and go, day and night."

Sure, start hauling, Steve muttered to himself, heading out into cold autumn air. *Let them drag anchor like I've been dragging it.*

Steve awoke the rattly motor and drove toward the elevator west of town. The closer he came to the tall building, that had "Durango Wheat Exchange" lettered in flaking white on peeling gray, the less sure he was that even five thousand dollars was worth the effort. Where Lucius V. Moore was concerned it had always been tough sledding. Intervening years hadn't erased that sensitive recollection. Instead they had put him on his guard.

HEAVY frost on the tortuous grades, making the oiled highway slippery and treacherous, delayed Steve Connor's return. For a good part of the way he was compelled to snake along behind an oil truck and trailer. He was in an irritable mood when he passed through Prairie Flat and rattled into the outskirts of Durango.

He parked near the grain elevator, walked around to the north or loading side. He mounted the warped steps at the northeast corner where a low-roofed utility shed had been added on and now jutted east, parallel with and sandwiched between the highway and railroad spur. After unlocking the entrance door he glanced east in cold gray light.

Durango looked the same bleak, sun-and-wind-blasted wide spot in the road it had always been. Half a dozen buildings still stood on either side of the through highway. One group clustered around the brick bank building, the other across the street near Telfer's Mercantile Store. Late model trucks parked nearby attested to new wheat wealth. The small red railroad depot was still on the other side of town, across the tracks.

Steve turned glumly and entered the building. He flicked on the electric droplight, unbarred the wide sliding door in front of the chute and shoved it back on rusty, screeching rollers. He needed light to work by. The cold sun would be up presently beyond the sawtooth range but he wasn't going to stand around waiting. This was a disagreeable chore to get through with as soon as possible. The town was too potent a reminder of things that might have been.

Using the flashlight he had stuck in the pocket of his khaki coveralls, Steve made a quick inspection. The electric motor failed to respond to the thrown switch. There was juice in the circuit, assuredly, for chaff-dusty droplights worked well enough.

Getting down into the grain sump, below ground level, he started examining the chain conveyor with its big metal baskets that he had originally revamped from old out-dated equipment. There was nothing

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tricky about the hoist rig that went up and over two cogwheels on a level with the top stairway landing. The baskets simply flopped over, spilling the wheat into the big, strongly-braced center bin. Then they folded back into clips on contact with a leather-padded lip and were carried down into the grain sump again on the two endless chain belts.

To make sure there was nothing binding inside the wooden chute in which the cup hoist worked, Steve unhooked the front, cupboard-like doors and checked all the way up. In several places the broad S-shaped interlocking links had been welded. The wide baskets seemed to work satisfactorily, spaced out two feet apart and hinged to roller bars sunk in the steel links.

The sun was warming the draughty structure, its old ribs festooned with dust-weighted cobwebs, when Steve finally located the trouble. Some bungler had fixed a roller bar by winding bailing wire around it and soldering in place. The thick wad gave a basket too much upslant, making it drag against the housing. Besides that the big motor, which was located under the first flight of open stairway steps that zig-zagged along the south bin wall to the roof, was caked with oily dirt.

Steve went out to his car and returned with a kit of tools, can of gasoline and rags. The first thing to do, he decided morosely, was to clean the motor's armature and get to the heart of things.

As he began work he felt satisfied that Max Smithers would take care of bus repairs during his absence. Intermountain Trailway folk were good to work for. They had been pretty decent, allowing him to get away. Once he got the hoist to running, the old granary would be almost like the old days when he'd installed the rig to pay for fencing posts and wire.

The old days. When he'd traded around with cooperative neighbors, then half human. Traded for plowing, planting, cutting, threshing. Working year after year with brightly polished hopes. Borrowing, toward the end. Borrowing before seed was ever drilled into the ground for the next harvest gamble.

But there had been Melanie then. Lovely curly hair like spun gold. Direct blue eyes that, in those days, were like stars that twinkled with an inner something reserved exclusively for himself. Melanie even then had taught school. There had been rides together into Wheatland Falls, to see a movie, enjoy a dance or social with the young crowd. On the way back the golden moon, sometimes, coming up over the winding Missouri, looked as big as a blown-up house.

Past tense on all that stuff, Steve thought bitterly. There had come that summer when his field of golden grain waved like Melanie's curls in the balmy night winds. And then glaring August days with blistering heat. The rush of harvest, driving teams, doing combine repairs. Contributing his share of field work from dawn to dark. Always ravenously hungry. Always filthy tired.

And then that blasted Crawford, the Rocco brothers' cousin, had to fall into grinding gears. Completely blotto with cheap rotgut that Rod Rocco handed out. And Rocco, the big louse, was lounging back like a denim-clad sultan, letting his combine do his contract work, hardly lifting a finger.

It was all too evident. Old Moore hadn't had to remind him. Every last one of the homesteaders had been silent but their surly aloofness had been quite sufficient. He had wanted to beat Rocco to a pulp but there had been insufficient proof. Rocco had been too clever. All the hands, he had explained slyly, had been drinking several kinds of liquor besides his dago red. Didn't they sweat it out inside a half hour anyway?

Maybe he had acted impulsively, after his winter wheat had been ruined when left standing too long. Maybe he shouldn't have sounded off when Moore came out to take over, before he walked down the country road never to return.

Of course Melanie had later sided with her father. She had gone to Seattle for Summer Institute and was absent at the blowoff. His letter had ben returned unopened. He knew why. Her old man had thoroughly uprooted the prospects of a possible son-in-law.

Steve tried the switch again. There was a burring whine inside the cleaned motor but no motion.

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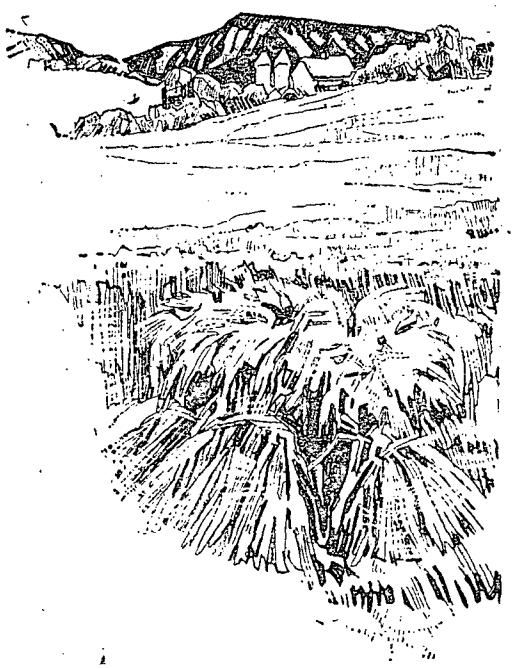
Disgustedly he cut the juice. Some lame brain had monkeyed with sealed parts. He snatched up a rag, wiped greasy hands, locked up and disconsolately went to lunch.

THE night wind was beginning to pick up when Steve finally got the cockeyed basket fixed, the chains lined up, the motor running. At least the rig was clanking empty, he decided, sighing in relief.

After cleaning with gas and washing in the nearby slack-watered creek, Steve ate another poor meal at Wincher's Restaurant. Returning, he pulled his sleeping bag out of the Ford, then went into the granary. He closed the door and locked it again. He spread his duffel on the first stairway, landing, slipped off boots and jacket, doused lights and crawled in.

He lay there a long time, listening to eddying gusts of wind that whined around the sunken bin and fingered under the eaves. Occasionally a car went past, descend-



ing into westerly Choteau Canyon or climbing the bench that led southeast to Gilhaven. A coyote, somewhere north, kept up its intermittent howling.

Finally he dozed.

Somebody pounding on the big sliding door awakened him. He rolled out on wheat-littered boards and turned on the droplight. He stuffed khaki into corduroy pants, shrugged into the wool jacket. Slipping moccasins over his gray wool socks he hurried down.

It proved to be big Weller Davis on the outside platform. His smile faded, seeing Steve. "Ready to unload," he said roughly, wiping his nose on the cuff of his mackinaw. "Luce said the machinery'd be fixed. I doubted it."

"Go ahead and unload," Steve said coldly. "The hoist is fixed. I'll push the trough under your tail gate. It's three bushel every time the partition flapper empties by its own weight. I'll tally and give you a duplicate slip. You better keep track too. My word isn't worth anything, you know."

"I know," Davis growled, the words echoing along the corridor in front of the thick-walled bin. "Start yore gimmick to rollin'."

That was the start of another day at an early morning hour. Before Davis left there were other growers whom Steve remembered, also newcomers he had never seen before. All with big, sturdy, heavily-loaded trucks.

It was around three o'clock when a loaded wagon was backed up by a pair of mules under the outside reflector light.

"Yah hear 'bout the hijackin', fellers?" the driver inquired in a nasal twang. "Somebody got most of the wheat from the Consolidated elevator at the Junction las' night. It war well nigh plumb full."

"Ah heah 'bout it," a blond-haired stranger said, mealy mouthed. "In fact ah read wheah they's wheatleggin' in the Dakotas right naow. One gang got ovah thirty thousan' dollahs wuth in five days."

"Quite a racket," Shorty O'Keefe commented, coming up the steps to wait his turn. "The mobsters bring big time methods to the flat lands. I understand they send someone ahead to case a promising granary." Sharp dark eyes strayed over the handful of hard-bitten wheat men, then settled on Steve's upturned face and lingered. "Somebody who doesn't belong."

Steve said nothing. Comments or arguing would only make things worse. He was simply part of the dusty elevator now, loading a bin to do a job.

It was while he was oiling the top cog

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shaft that he heard the clanking jar down below, the grinding crunch as the motor stopped. He raced down the stairs, almost losing his footing on wheat grains, and cut the switch.

There was milling and muttering near the freight door while he made a quick check. He had to shovel slippery wheat aside in order to get down to the housed bottom cogwheels.

Exploring fingers finally located the trouble. They brought it up, clenched around the object. It was a smooth rock the size of a grapefruit. Somebody had deliberately tossed it into the sump behind a chain plate. It was a wonder it hadn't broken a link clear across.

Steve swung savagely on the fishy-eyed growers. Then he tightened up on blistering fury and went back to work. He started oozing nervous sweat, in spite of the cold, dusty, barn-like structure, and made temporary repair on one ear of a broken link. Again he started the motor. This time he stayed near the edge of the wheat pit, watching carefully as baskets came down, scooped up wheat and ascended inside the wooden chute.

The O'Keefe wheat had been dumped in and Shorty had gone when the motor whined again and stopped dead. Metal whanged near the top of the chute. There was a loud banging on board siding, then a resounding crash in the pit below.

Steve groaned as he leaped to the switch box and cut the current. This time the fixed link had let go and both swivel ears had broken. New holes would have to be drilled or a new link fashioned and put in. One chain had fallen clear down, taking loaded baskets with it. It would take plenty of time to unload before repairs could be made again.

Hell's bells! Steve raved to himself. *Of all the blasted jobs I've ever tackled, this is it! I'm going to eat now if these fools complain clear to Wheatland Falls!*

He made good his threat for it appeared he had a thankless day-and-night job on his hands. He locked up, leaving farmers outside to wait. He filled his own empty storage bin though the coffee resembled dish water, the fried spuds like burned flannel, the steak as tough as walrus hide.

Finally he headed back under a lightening sky. As he unlocked the door he noticed that most of the trucks had been moved over near the utility shed, that no one, apparently, was around. He had seen several growers come into the cafe after him, to spend a little time over coffee, too.

He was near the grain sump, with lights going again, when he heard footsteps on planking outside. He glanced up, thinking it to be impatient farmers again. Then he stared at the tall, elderly, sloppy-looking fellow who came in, rifle riding the crook of his overcoated right arm. Behind him was a young woman who wore a green plaid jacket and striped gray skirt.

"Hello, Steve," the girl said in a low throaty voice, stuffing ringlets under a tan beret. "Dad told me about your working on the hoist. This is John Halberg. I think you know John. How you doing?"

"Lousy," Steve said irritably. "Had it all fixed, Melanie, and a dozen trucks unloaded, when somebody tossed a rock. That didn't quite wreck things, but an hour ago a mended link let go. It's going to take some time to get it fixed and back over the top cogs. But don't worry, I'm seeing Luce through. What's Sniffles doing here with a rifle?"

"Dad wants a guard put on the wheat until it's shipped out," Melanie explained quietly. "If he doesn't make it he may as well close the bank doors. He isn't at all well, you know."

"Yah-yah, I heard," Steve said harshly. "All involved. And now he's heard about the hijacking over near The Falls and is worried stiff."

Steve gave Melanie a flickering glance. Yes, just as good looking as ever. Now about twenty-seven, a couple years younger than himself. The same proud head, the same high shoulders. The blue eyes, however, looked tired.

"By criminy, I'm guardin'," Halberg rasped, interrupting Steve's thoughts. The fellow squinted short-sighted eyes, tipped back the sloppy blue cap from off a gray-whiskered flat face. "I take care a' the depot now but I do consid'able huntin' an' fishin' too. Don't mind sayin' I'm a purty good shot. Mebbe I'll git in some huntin' here."

"You may find a few rats," Steve com-

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mented coldly. "I heard a couple last night. Well, I've got plenty of work to do." Turning to Melanie he said, "There's no heat in this place. Don't catch cold. It's pretty chilly around here."

"So I've noticed," Banker Moore's daughter observed, turning away. "Is there anything you need?"

"Nothing at all," Steve said, pushing Halberg out of the way. "If I want anything I'll send Sniffles hunting for it. He's good. He said so himself."

"But I got orders to stay here," Halberg said, bristling, using a red bandana on a dripping hook nose. "I'm stayin' till the cars is loaded an' pulled outa the sidin'."

"Then stay," Steve snapped, "but stay out of the way and watch which way you point that Winchester."

AFTER Melanie had gone Steve cussed himself. He didn't have to be such a surly ape even if there was a deep-rooted urge to hurt others in Durango as he had been hurt.

Take this Sniffles Halberg, for instance, this village character whom he had hired, years before, to help dig post holes and string barbed wire on his homestead. Halberg had been slow, undependable and sneaky. Four rolls of fencing wire had disappeared while he'd been on the job. He had sported fresh denims and a new leather coat a little later on. It hadn't taken much figuring.

And here this goon was, back like a case of smallpox. Still in the county, now a parasite at the so-called depot.

"Why don't you go outside and keep watch?" Steve said finally. "It's nearly daylight. No jack rabbits are going to jump out of this pit. Go shut the wind off. If anybody—"

A loud horn sounded outside. "Hey, you in there!" somebody called in a resonant, carrying voice, a voice that sent a memory chord thrumming in Steve's brain.

"Unlatch the big door and shove it back," Steve ordered impatiently. "Maybe some twerp thinks he can unload. Tell him to come back after he's had his breakfast,"

"Quit cher foolin'." Halberg said sullenly, producing plug tobacco from an overall pocket. "I'm guardin'."

"Nuts!"

Steve scrambled out of the grain sump, wiped his hands, unhooked the door and shoved it back. It banged against the wall in the wind that felt cold enough to bring snow. He flipped on the platform light again.

As he jumped down off the planking he noted that it was no truck, as he had expected, but a car and a classy one. The sedan was long, low and black and was headed toward Durango.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

The driver was a big husky sunk in camelhair. A light colored crusher was cocked on thick dark hair. In the shadows he appeared good looking in a hard, beefy way.

Apparently he knew how to pick women. The girl, decorating the dark leather seat beside him and nearest to Steve, was a small honey blonde wearing a beaver coat. Except for petulant lips and hard, predatory eyes she might have been considered beautiful. The faint smell of liquor came on the wind.

"What can I do for you?" Steve repeated warily. Both of these motorists were giving him and the elevator close scrutiny. He knew they couldn't see much of his face, for daylight was still dim and the platform light was at his back.

"Getting Moore's wheat loaded, I suppose?" the driver said, white teeth flashing. "Going to have the cars ready for one-forty-two's hookup? Everybody's cashing in. Hey, Babe, light me a match. My lighter's dead."

The match was snapped on an obedient long fingernail. As it flared Steve recognized the bulldog jaws, thick lips and shoestring mustache. The master of ceremonies voice should have told him. Rod Rocco in the flesh. Making big dough, he'd heard, in Spokane taxis, drive yourself cars, juke boxes and slot machines. Everything legit—apparently.

"We're getting wheat loaded," Steve said evenly, trying to quiet the blood pounding in his temples. Rocco had always made him feel inferior, a hopeless misfit—now a failure. Rocco had always had his easy way.

In the old days he'd had his calculating eye on Melanie Moore, too, Steve recalled briefly, but Melanie must have tactfully set

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him straight. Melanie would, if she didn't like. She was a tactful diplomat.

"Well, just wanted to make sure," Rocco said smoothly. "Everybody in The Falls wants cars, including ourselves. Ever see wheat so high priced? Well, thanks, bub."

"Watch your cigarettes," Steve warned tightly. "There's dry Russian thistle banked all along the highway clear to town."

"Tell the jerk where to go," the young woman said in a low voice. "Let's get out of this wash."

"Thanks, but we have ash trays," Rocco said, awakening the motor. "Thanks a lot."

Steve backed toward the elevator. He watched twin tail lights follow bright head beams as the car purred in a circle, then headed west toward the Canyon and Wheatland Falls.

It looked like he hadn't been recognized but he wasn't sure. Rocco was too smart to give anything for free. It seemed peculiar that he would be down here by the Missouri. His interests were up in Washington if hearsay were correct.

"Who was that?" Halberg asked, from where he sat on a box near the wheat pit, when Steve returned. "Want to know whar the depot was?"

"Just looking for another sucker," Steve said slowly, thinking. "Had a woman along."

"Yeh, cold night," Halberg agreed, slumping back. "I'm shore glad I put on winter unions."

Oh shut up! Steve muttered to himself. Going over to the bin he picked up his flashlight, then went outside again.

THE setup was not at all to his liking. He preferred to work alone in an emergency and here was this useless Halberg who was supposed to be on watch. And Rocco's short visit hadn't been welcome either. It had brought back that old feeling of inferiority, that deep-seated fear that was hard to define.

Steve unlocked his coupe and pulled down the Army blanket thrown over the torn seat. He picked up the 12-gauge shotgun from the rear shelf, then emptied a partly filled box of shells into coverall pockets. Wrapping the blanket in a long roll around the gun, he put it under his arm, locked the coupe and went back once more into the granary.

"Wind's colder," he said grudgingly to Halberg as he locked the door. "I'll need another blanket if I get any time for sleep." He went up the first landing steps, put the wrapped gun and shells under his sleeping bag.

"Yeh, it's cold here," Halberg agreed. He pulled the greasy-edged coat collar closer around a scrawny throat. "If I'd a knowed it was so cold I'd a ast ol' Luce fer an extry dollar a night."

"You going to stay right there?" Steve asked pointedly, getting back to work. "Truckers will be coming back to wait."

"By jiggers, shore. It's too cold outside an' it ain't any warmer anywhar else inside this grain box, even upstairs."

The mention of "upstairs" put Steve to thinking. There was something else he wanted to do before mending the link and restringing the whole chain up the chute. He might as well do it now before the farmers returned. It wouldn't take long.

He pawed through his big tool box and found what he wanted. He picked up a fuse gimmick, a switch, small coil of insulated wire, pliers and tape and went up the stairs again.

Droplights on the landings were on but they gave none too good working illumination. What he was going to install wouldn't make the first landing light any brighter but it would give a measure of safety, acting as a warning signal if anybody tried sneaking up or down the stairs. Halberg wasn't to be trusted.

He left the light burning over his sleeping bag as he started splicing a "no-bump" fuse on one of the live wires. This particular kind of fuse, Steve had learned some time before, worked on the principle of a proximity fuse, the kind that made anti-aircraft fire so effective during the war. It was now used in some hotel corridors. As a person walked along a hallway, his approaching movements were detected by one of these microwave units. This unit flashed on a red or green light, visible to guests and warned them of someone approaching around a corner.

Steve had made use of this microwave or "no-bump" fuse unit on the rear end of

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Intermountain Trailway busses. At night, when backing up in tight spots, the driver could detect any scurrying pedestrian to the rear when a warning back-up light would flash on and off of its own accord. When the jaywalker had cleared the immediate vicinity the light would go out.

The microwave unit and switch fixed to his liking, Steve left the light on, with no present change, unit switch open. Later on, when he'd turn in, he'd use the cutoff switch, set the fuse, rig the doused light so it could do its flashing watch dog work.

"W'at you bin doin'?" Halberg asked when Steve returned to the wheat pit. "I thought yah hadda fix this hoist."

"Been wrapping some frayed wires," Steve said guardedly. "Don't want any lights shorting out in the rush."

He breathed a little easier now, once he started concentrating on the hoist repair. If Halberg started roaming around or got out of hand, there would be a couple of jokers in the pot. That included the shotgun, its shells loaded with one ounce rifled slugs.

Steve started whistling as he got out his hand drill and hack saw. Then he thought of Rod Rocco and the whistle petered out.

IT WAS ten o'clock that night by the time Steve finally had the hoist repaired, the chain in place, the metal baskets back on bars and cotter pin locked. He ran the clattery outfit until wheat in the sump had been lifted and dumped into the big storage bin.

Truckers had already come and gone, had grown disgusted. At the moment none were around. Dog tired and chilled to the bone, Steve put his tools back in his kit box, closed the lid and snapped the padlock.

Up on the stairway landing he dragged his sleeping bag nearer to the east wall, away from the railing edge, out of the light from below. After dousing the droplight by using the microwave unit switch, he loaded the five-shot gun by familiar feel and put it on the blanket beside him. Then he slipped off jacket and moccasins and crawled in.

He lay there for some time, listening. There was little sound except the whining night wind, the occasional scratching of rolling, banking thistle against the outside west wall. Halberg stayed on his box. Presently Steve heard raspy breathing, then snoring.

He relaxed then, trying to rest until farmers would come banging on the door again.

It seemed only minutes later when he opened his eyes to see the light flashing on and off, heard the stairway creaking. Hand on shotgun, he raised on one elbow. Halberg's tall figure was silhouetted at the landing edge.

"Sniffles, get downstairs and let a man rest!" Steve snapped. "What the devil's the matter with you?"

"I kin go anywhar I please in here," Halberg sneered, blowing his nose against a canvas-gloved finger. "By jiggers, I'm watchin' the place good. I gotta key. I—"

"You belong outside and you know it. If anybody wants to come in they're not going to use an extension ladder. Get downstairs and stay there. I've got orders to fill this elevator with wheat, then unload into freight cars. It's a real job without being bothered by you. Now scram!"

"I don't hafta, fer you nor anybody else 'cept Mister Moore," Halberg said angrily, clutching his rifle, raising it over his head. "You jest try an' stop me an' I'll crimp yah good. I never did like yore style. You ain't changed none."

There were certain things that always riled Steve Connor. One of them was a threat. In the flashing light he sat up and brought the Remington to his shoulder. He could see fairly well where Halberg's

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gloved hand grasped the lever carbine near the breech.

Snapping off the safety, he aimed for the wooden stock and pulled the trigger. The old granary filled with a deafening, echoing roar. In the recoil Steve saw Halberg whirl and jerk down his arm. The Winchester fell clattering to the floor below.

"Yah tried to kill me!" Halberg yelled, pulling off his glove. "Yah aimed delib'rate."

"I hit the stock," Steve snarled. He got up and turned on steady light. Slipping on moccasins he pushed the cantankerous Halberg downstairs and took possession of his .30-.30.

"You're not hurt," Steve said then. "I only hit this gun. I hear a truck coming now. I can work and guard, too. I don't want you around any longer. Go and complain to Old Luce. If you come back anywhere near this elevator I'm going to quit the job flat. Tell him that. Now get out before I really furrow your pack rat hide."

"I'll tell Mister Moore about yah," Halberg threatened. "I'll tell how yah shot—hey Davis!"

Steve pushed Halberg out on the windy porch near Weller Davis' red truck. Halber's complaint did no good. The beefy, blustery farmer saw the guns Steve held, heard his explanation. Then he glowered but said nothing. Perhaps it was Steve's lean, determined jaw and the flinty gleam in gray-green eyes that warned him.

Shortly other trucks arrived. There were surly, sidelong glances and grouped conferences, as Steve tallied and operated the hoist, unloading. He kept the Remington autoloader by the bin with him.

It was after two o'clock in the afternoon when he asked the mule driver, about to leave again, to bring him a couple of sandwiches.

"Sure, I getcha a big meal," the man said, inhaling a pinch of snuff. "Yer workin' hard, feller."

Time passed but no sandwiches arrived. Steve saw the muler come back from Durango and pass on by, toward the west, but he did not turn in off the road.

Lucius Moore showed up, later in the day.

"I'll have the cars shunted back on the spur," he said, watching the hoist work, the baskets dip and raise wheat. "There's a switch engine near the depot. I'll get young Hanford to start loading with the hinge spout. He's a nice boy. He's helped before. You look tired, son."

"Oh I'll get by," Steve said, shrugging. "The only thing I need is plain ordinary victuals. I've tried all day to get one of these sourdoughs to run an errand to your ulcer gulch cafe. They're as much help as magpies in a truck garden. I've used the phone near the door. They don't send food out to guys like me."

"I'll get you fixed up," Moore assured. "I'm sorry I didn't know before. I told Sniffles to stay at the depot. He won't bother you again."

Food came finally. A husky boy who said his name was Mel Hanford brought a picnic basket and a quart thermos full of hot coffee. He was a right nice tow-headed kid wearing dungarees and blue turtleneck sweater.

After wolfing food, Steve toiled steadily hour after hour, emptying trucks, guarding the hoist. In a lull he checked Hanford as he loaded a freight car. He watched him board up the door as wheat deepened inside, spilled from the long galvanized iron spout that jutted out of the building's thick south side toward the tracks.

A short time later a train, half coaches, half freights, chuffed up on the south bench grade and stopped at the depot beyond the town. After it had rattled off southeast, an old switch engine backed in on the spur and shifted another freight car into position for more grain loading.

Night came on again. With a little food stoking his furnace Steve didn't mind surly farmers so much. Wheat was coming in and going out into the cars. He was getting his job done. That was all that mattered. It had to be finished by tomorrow noon.

The tension, however, was showing. It was revealed in Steve's red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes, in the deepened lines from nose to determined mouth. It showed in the way he coldly regarded Moore's customers, as if half expecting they would try to knife him in the back.

The second car was filled and wheat was

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rising again inside the granary bin when Hanford came in from the siding.

"Guess you'll make it," he said, grinning. He wiped his dusty face on a sleeve. "Cars need to be shifted again. The engine'll be back around ten. Will you take care of it?"

"Sure I'll take care of it," Steve said, relieved. "You're a good worker. Do as well early tomorrow and I'll treat to all the milk shakes you can hold."

"Thanks. That'd be jake. Well, good night."

It was nearly midnight when trucks stopped coming and wheat growers took their sour mugs home for a temporary rest. Steve felt thankful, almost genial. The elevator was nearly full again. Two freights loaded. A night and half a day to go.

After the engine had shifted another car into place Steve was about to lock up and go over to the restaurant for a hot meal when he checked the impulse. Instead he sat down on the stairs and started eating basket left-overs. Down in his muscular frame something told him to take it easy, that jockeys didn't ease up on the homestretch.

Of course. That's all he was. A wheat jockey. Brief custodian of golden grains. Trying to make a quick strike by bringing in a winner.

Thinking about it made him nervous. He brought the shotgun closer and leaned it against the edge of the granary pit.

THE night wind returned and blasted as usual. By one o'clock it was moaning under the flooring, shaking the big sliding door in spite of hook and bar. It was eerie in the big place. Dust kept stirring in the front pit hallway. It was draughty on the south open stairways.

Steve finally got up, stretched stiffened legs, pulled the collar of his wool jacket around numbed ears. *To heck with this penetrating cold,* he muttered. *I'm going to hit the sack for awhile and get warm.*

He switched on the first floor light, the only one now lit up, and started climbing the creaky stairs. Then he stopped, thinking. Somehow the stone that had given him trouble in the pit, came to mind. It had been a wonder that a second small boulder hadn't been tossed in, too.

It was the thought of a large stone that gave him an idea.

Taking his flashlight and gun he went outside. He crossed the narrow road to the spur track, circled freight cars, slid down into the creek bed. He located several fairly round rocks, then carried them to the porch door and rolled them inside. Two more struggling trips gave him a good dozen large stones.

Back inside, he locked up. Leaving the gun on his temporary bunk he carried the rocks up to the top landing and deposited them under the grimy slide window. Returning to his sleeping bag he adjusted the microwave switch and settled down in cold solitude. The light flashed until he grew still, then blackness descended again.

Another evening started to wear slowly away. Once relaxed, Steve realized he was tired. Yes, dead beat.

It seemed only minutes later that he jerked awake. His luminous-dialed wrist watch read two-thirty. He heard a peculiar chuffing-churning sound down below. The wind was still blasting but this sound wasn't the wind. It came from the south, the side near the freight cars.

The soft chuffing continued as Steve unzipped his bag and cut the switch of the flashing light. In stygian darkness he pulled on moccasins, jacket and duck cap. Pocketing a half dozen shells, he grabbed up the shotgun and tiptoed along the landing to the small window facing the tracks. From here the adjustable grain spout was controlled by rope and pulley, the discharge gate raised and lowered.

He was shivering when he cautiously opened the lower sash and peered out. A sudden gust of wind whipped off his long-peaked cap and sent it spinning.

His eyes gradually adjusted to the scene outside, under the weak cold light of twinkling stars. Looking closer between the track and the elevator wall directly below he saw the dark top of a truck, then a jumbo trailer behind it.

Steve whirled and hurried up to the top landing. He eased open the dirty window. Carefully he peered out, clutching the frame for support in the whipping blasts of the wind.

It was worse than he had feared. There

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were three big truck tractors and trailers lined up, one behind another in the narrow roadway between the elevator and the spur track. The third trailer, directly underneath, was apparently being loaded with wheat. But how?

STEVE strained tired eyes and stared. *Hell's bells!* he muttered to himself. These night harvesters weren't using the loading spout at all. They had a portable motor on the trailer's roof that was working a power auger in a hole through the granary wall! A similar auger, with its big, rain-spout-like undertrough, worked on a geared shaft from the same motor and was sticking into the freight car's nearer side, halfway down. Wheat was being force fed into truck roof openings from both sides, along the metal chutes.

The way the augers were churning it wouldn't take long to load the trailer. From all indications it appeared they had been here for some time for the two trucks up ahead seemed full of wheat. They rode low on weighted springs.

Steve eased back and cussed himself roundly. Tired and numb with cold he had fallen dead asleep. The shrieking wind had funneled aside noises of approaching motors, the sly sounds of backing in. These chiselers obviously thought no one was around, there being no lights, no sounds within. Of all the asinine, weak-spined dopes! He was ten times worse than Sniffles Halberg. Once back in The Falls he could sleep his dopey head off.

He had to work fast now if he was going to do anything at all. But what to do? It looked like he'd better clear out and forget the whole thing. The wheat was gone, ready to roll.

The more he thought about it the more convinced he became that he would have to do something. He had his conscience to live with, hadn't he?

Steve put gun shells in his right jacket pocket for easy reach. He hurried down the stairs, going by feel, and picked up slivers from the railing. Groping in darkness he finally located the cabinet phone and cranked it as quietly as possible. He had to repeat the process before he roused the country operator.

"Hellaow!" a cat-like voice finally yawned along the wire. "You want somethin'?"

"Do I—of course!" Steve whispered harshly, close to the mouthpiece. "This is emergency! Call the sheriff at once! Truckers are stealing wheat at the Durango elevator! Get that? Hijackers! Right now! Hurry! They may kill somebody if you don't hurry!"

"My word!" the voice shrilled, now without a trace of sleep. "You don't say! They certainly have their nerve! I'll call—"

Steve hung up and hurried back up the stairs, fighting a cloud of dust and chaff stirred up by the wind sweeping through the partly open windows. He decided quickly that it was fortunate he had been inside the building. No doubt lookouts had been posted in the yard.

Again at the top landing, Steve placed the gun against the thick wall. He picked up one of the stones, leaned out into screeching wind, tossed the rock at the center of the nearer flashing, whirling auger. Without waiting he cast another big stone at the twisting steel between trailer and railroad car.

The first stone made a direct hit. The second was a clean miss. Steve saw the big trough buckle under crashing weight, then scream and stop. A geared shaft to the portable motor whipped up, then fell impotent. The chuffing turned to coughing, then quit dead. Momentarily there was silence except for the wind, the interminable night wind.

Knowing that discovery of an elevator occupant would be but a matter of seconds, Steve grabbed up his shotgun and drew a bead on the first truck's nearer tires. The 12-gauge roared twice but the rifled slugs did not seem to register.

Somebody shouted down below. Steve lowered his aim and shot at the nearer front tire of the last truck. This time there was a quick hissing of air. He leaped back before bullets tore into the solid 2x6 wall near his face and splattered slivers. Powerful "pow-pow" sounds came on the wind. A high velocity bullet ricocheted into a roof timber.

The best place for me, Steve decided, thoughts racing, *is right up here in the corner. The trucks will be slow in getting away with one of their tires flat.* These

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mobsters, however, if they ran true to form, wouldn't just clear out. They'd look up Mister Watchman and thank him personally for gumming up the works.

Crouching there under the peaked roof, Steve recalled his microwave unit. It had to work now if it ever worked at all.

He crept down to the bottom landing and flipped on the switch. The droplight started flashing and continued until he was out of range.

On the way up the steps he felt something soft under foot, then located his cap. He finger-combed thick hair and snugged the headpiece down. Back near the top window he squatted down, took off the duck cap and stuck it up above the window sill on the muzzle of his gun, holding it against the frame to keep it from blowing away.

A sub-machine gun started spewing. Slugs tore into timber. A couple of bullets found the crown of the cap and tugged.

"T'ink yah got 'im?" a gravelly voice growled down below. "We gotta work fast. Those Durango drupes'll sure hear w'at's goin' on in this wind. It's carryin' that way."

"To hell with them, Slug," said a smooth voice. "Get Gordo to help Max change tires. Nobody can hear anything in this breeze. I found that out at Choteau Junction. Look here—"

The rest was lost on the wind. Steve strained his ears but to no avail. He eased back against the wall and wiped cobwebs out of his cold-drawn face. He tried to figure things as he loaded more shells.

Nerve! The telephone operator had certainly been right. These wheatleggers were all nerve. Here they were, changing tires right under his nose!

Steve waited, listening, consumed in his barrage of furious thoughts. A couple of guns were trained on this window beside him. No doubt on the other windows, too. The minute he'd stick his head out to use the Remington—

Then he heard the scraping on wood against the outside wall. As he waited tensely, he saw fingers slide over the sill. A head wearing a stocking cap raised slowly. Steve let bull shoulders rise clear before he went into action.

"Hey, boss! He's—"

The gravel voice never finished. The thick-necked thug tried to turn his face away from the stock of Steve's gun as he rammed out in full fury. Steve heard ladder ends skid and boots rasp on rungs. Then a heavy body banged against granary siding and fell free. Something thudded on hard-packed earth below.

A quick, savage fusillade bloomed after that. Bullets made a rectangular pattern around the window frame, filled the elevator's interior with metal hornets. When they finally died down the wind resumed its heavy dirge.

Steve was again crouched against the wall when he heard a board squeak down on the ground floor. Then the lower stairway creaked as if live weight moved over it. Shortly the no-bump fuse started the light bulb to flashing.

Whipping out his flashlight, Steve brought the shotgun to his shoulder. Left hand high above his head and to the left he flicked on the spot and caught Rod Rocco full in its glare.

Apparently Rocco was wise to this high arm's length spotlight idea. He snapped up a hand gun that looked like a Luger and fired at the flashing stairway bulb, putting it out with one shot. Raising his aim he then let go at the light in Steve's hand.

Things happened fast then, Steve fired one handed as the shattered light went out. A bullet tore into his left forearm. He jackknifed to one knee, bit back jetting pain and released another jolting slug. He had seen what these one ounce rifled shotgun loads could do on mountain lion. Damage, short range, was terrific.

When a sardonic laugh and another snap-roar sent a bullet lower, closing in on a mortal target, Steve did likewise. He planted a bullet of his own on the lower stairway landing lip, another last try to the right, vaguely sensing the moving form near his sleeping bag.

It was this latter blasting charge that brought the gasping grunt, the scratching of hard heels as a body slewed around. Then Steve heard a garbled curse as Rocco's big body hit dry planking and made wheat grains dance.

Steve was trying to reload one-handed

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when he heard tramping feet down on the freight platform. Two powerful spotlights stabbed the black bowels of the elevator building and roved around. Then somebody snapped on the light near the wheat pit.

"Thar's another one of 'em up on the top landin'," a rough voice exclaimed, its squatty, leather-jacketed owner covering Steve with a rifle. "Keep the spot steady, sheriff. Make one move, you up there, an' I'll blast yah offa—hey, you there!"

HIS arm was being bandaged when Steve regained consciousness. "I—I'm all right," he protested, trying to pull away. "You better take care of that Rocco before—"

"Take it easy, son," Lucius Moore said at his elbow. "You lost considerable blood. Rocco got his in the right shoulder bad. I doubt very much if he'll pull through. Deputies collared three of his men down the tracks. Shot another as he legged it across the creek. Think these are the men you've been tailing, Sheriff Glover?"

"Definitely sure," the tall, heavy-set sheriff said, tried to clear his husky voice as he holstered his Magnum. "Same tire tracks as at the Junction. Same hole borin' methods. I've wanted to catch up with this Spokane slicker for some time. He got too big for his britches long before he ever left Durango Township. What bullets didn't do why poisoned liquor did."

"What—what do you mean by that?" Steve asked, feeling very old and very tired.

"Why Rod Rocco," Glover explained, tipping back a tan Stetson. "I'm danged sure he poisoned that Crawford cousin of his years ago. I figure Crawford was drunk, blind an' agonized when he was chawed up by combine machinery. Rocco, I'm certain, doted on slow poison. Looks to me he enjoyed seeing people suffer. I think an' exhumin' an' chemical go-over will show how Crawford really died, even now."

"Hell's bells!" Steve snapped. "Why didn't you say so years ago? Everybody said I, thought I—"

"I know, I know, Steve," the sheriff placated, scratching a sandy sideburn with a freckled finger. "I had to let things ride, to collect evidence. Nobody arrested you, did they? Rocco was a sharp one. You know that. Too danged smart for folks hereabouts. You've heard the sayin': give 'em enough snubbin' hemp."

"Sure, let things drift, let things ride," Steve grumbled. "By letting things ride you certainly put the skids under me. I lost homestead, a wheat future—"

"And a girl," Glover finished for him.

"I don't think you need worry, Steve, about homestead, wheat or 'the girl,'" Banker Moore assured. "I'm quite sure benefited farmers will double that five thousand when they hear how well you did your job. I could almost guarantee Melanie will be right glad."

"I've had time to think," Steve said coldly. "I want only wages, Luce, not your five grand." Then the name registered. "Melanie!" he exclaimed, somewhat mollified. "Why she wouldn't—"

"I think Melanie will," Lucius Moore said confidently, snugging up his worn raccoon collar. The flat salt-and-pepper mustache spread into a wide smile. "Good grief son! Hasn't she confided to her old man?"

Steve grinned through considerable pain. The desire for retaliation, for blindly striking out to hurt others as he had been hurt didn't seem so important now. As he looked at friendly faces around him the old fear of Rod Rocco seemed to slip away. No longer was there a feeling of inferiority.

"Then maybe I'll come calling again," he said, "if you don't mind. That is, after we get the freight cars patched and loaded. I always like to finish up a job."

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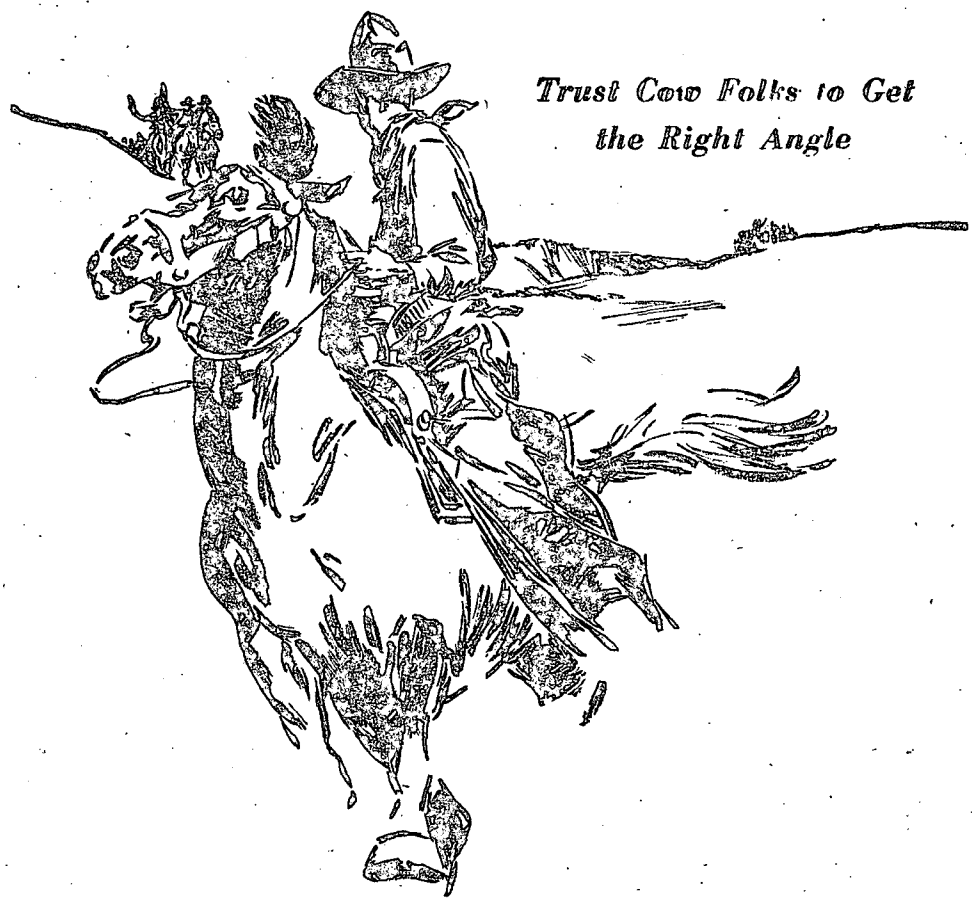

Trust Cow Folks to Get the Right Angle

ALL THE CARDS WERE BLACK

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

THE too-bright eyes of the oldest desert prospector in Redondo County showed a friendly interest as the tall young stranger sank into a chair across the saloon rear-corner table from him. In dusty range clothing, the stranger was. His lean face was drawn with weariness. His wide gray hat did not half conceal the brown-stained bandage he wore about his temples.

"Howdy cowpoke," the slightly inebriated *viejo* said. He introduced himself. "My name's Wilbur Trigg."

The weary newcomer smiled. "You can call me Henderson."

Silence fell over the early night crowd the next moment. In the front entrance had appeared a bullet-headed, squat giant dressed too well, carrying a new ivory-butted six-shooter in tied-down leather on his broad thigh. Henderson muttered:

Who's the hippopotaymus?"

"Biddle Kettler," muttered old Trigg. "He used to run with Pete Destin, the big rustler, but lately has became Sheriff Hart Bailey's chief deputy. Hart gave him the job on the principal of settin a cow-thief to ketch cow-thieves; but all that happened was, Hart now lays flat of his back from a rustler bullet, whilst Bid Kettler de-splays his tremenjous a'thority. Say, Bid has got you spotted—*cuidao, amigo!*"

Beady eyes narrow and hard, the deputy strutted toward the back. A man at the bar hailed him. Although his gaze turned for only a few seconds, the cowboy who called

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himself Henderson had vanished when his attention went to the rear again.

Wilbur Trigg, plodding down the dimly-lighted main street ten minutes later, came upon Henderson in the shadow cast by a dark false-front building. The stranger spoke in low tones:

"Old-timer, I was fixin' to ask you a question when that dressed-up hippopotaymus busted in. This hilly desert that lays west and south o' here, can it be crossed on a horse?"

"Fast work there in the saloon," drawled Trigg, low-voiced also. "You're scoutin' from law, cowpoke, but I somehow cain't figger you fer a bad 'un. Cross the desert on a hoss? Don't try it. Every water-hole is dry 'cept the one my shack is on. Now I want you to listen to somepin', which it's this here:

"The town, you'll notice, is on a creek. Dozen miles to the southeast, on the same creek, they is a big ranch, the UJ, which it's owned by Uncle Jim Truesdale, best man on earth. Is called Uncle Jim 'cause o' his habit of befriendin' down-and-outers, and it fits nice with the UJ. You ride down there and tell him Wib Trigg sent you. Think I'd git my nag and hustle. Good luck, stranger!"

"Thanks a heap," the stranger said, and he got his nag and hustled.

The sorrel cow horse had been ridden far and hard. Henderson didn't have the heart to push the animal, so it was late when he arrived at the UJ Ranch. A lamp still burned in the rambling old house of frame and adobe. Odd that they were still up, he thought as he dismounted beside a hitch-post near the front gallery steps.

Suddenly a thin figure materialized in the gloom before him and a cracked voice ordered, "Git' em into the air and say who you are and what yore business is!"

The newcomer glanced at the dim shape of the .45 Colt that bore upon his midriff, and put his hands up shoulder high. He bent a little, peered into wizened old face, and said:

"You can call me Henderson. Somebody name of Trigg, back in Redondo City, advised me to see Uncle Jim Truesdale, but I reckon you're not him."

"No. I'm Holly. I'll take you to the boss. But he's a heap tore up right now, so tore up he couldn't sleep, and you must be keerful to not cross him none."

Leathering his weapon, the old-timer led the way into the ranch house livingroom. Henderson found himself standing in the presence of a gaunt, white-haired six-footer, whose eyes were still keen, whose mouth and chin were rock firm, who sat with his back to a table on which burned an opal-shaded oil lamp.

Holly spoke. "Wib Trigg sent him. We can call him Henderson." Holly went back outside.

"In trouble," said Jim Truesdale, with his attention on the stained temple bandage "Bullet? A sheriff's?"

The visitor nodded. The gaunt old cattleman pointed to a chair. "Sit down and start talking."

THE visitor sat down. After an awkward minute, he began:

"When I was a very small button, I had a Uncle Jim. My dad's brother. He'd let me listen to his watch tick, and he whittled out a wooden gun for me and he'd take me in the buckboard and drive fast to make the wind blow. I remember, I used to be sorry for folks who didn't have any Uncle Jim I still am."

Truesdale's manner had been brusque It wasn't now.

"Why did you tell me that, cowboy?"

"Well, you said to start talkin'," Henderson answered, "and it just occurred to me to tell you that. I didn't want to talk about my trouble over in Nueva Mex. But I'll say this. Judgin' by what I've heard of you, Uncle Jim, I'm sure you woulda done exactly the same thing I did, if you'd been in my place."

"You met Wib Trigg in town."

Henderson told of meeting Trigg. He did not omit the near brush with Deputy Biddle Kettler.

Old Truesdale said:

"Maybe Wib misled you. I don't harbor men scouting from law, if I know it. The UJ has come to be a sort of refuge for men who haven't any other place to call home Some have done time in prisons. Some picked up bad names just being wild. Poor old Holly used to be a hell-roaring outlaw was sent up for life; did twenty years, and was pardoned. My crew swears by me, be

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haves when it can, and does good work. As for Deputy Bid Kettler:

"Bid is the biggest mistake Sheriff Hart Bailey ever made. He's set on landing the sheriff job because then he really could collect from the rustlers! He's stretching himself while Hart is in bed from a cow-thief's bullet. Has tried framing crimes on my men. Was out here to arrest a puncher a few days ago, and somebody—I don't know just who—shot half his clothes off. As I said, this crew behaves itself when it can, but when it's r'iled it is plenty tough.

"Well, Henderson, you must be hungry. Come with me and get something to eat. Then you'd better be riding on."

He rose, took the lamp from the table and turned toward the diningroom. The weary, dust-stained visitor asked for and received the privilege of washing up. Truesdale had known what he was talking about when he'd said that old Holly was certain to feed and water the strange sorrel cow horse.

HENDERSON did full justice to a very good supper. As he pushed back his chair and rose, the long barrel of an ivory-butted six-shooter crept over a windowsill within ten feet of him, and behind the weapon glittered the beady, snake-mean eyes of Deputy Kettler!

"Slip 'em up rapid, smart cowboy!" the thickset giant said between tobacco-ugly teeth.

The stranger was not so foolish as to disobey. Old Jim Truesdale said quietly, "He hasn't got the cut of a criminal, Bid. You know what you're doing?"

"I sure do know," Kettler threw back. "A letter describin' him plain was in Bailey's mail today. Wanted a heap bad in Nueva Mex. Easy for me to figure he'd land here at the UJ."

Uncle Jim spoke again, and his voice now had a brittle ring. "It's said that you've murdered a prisoner or so, claiming they tried to escape; building up a reputation as sheriff timber, the idea was. Don't you try that with this man, Bid."

The deputy glowered, snarled, "I'll drill him if he makes a break, and you can depend on that. Walk over close, cowboy; you got a gun there I taken a hankerin' to. Then we'll be ready to start."

And, thought Henderson, be murdered on the way to town. A diabolically vindictive man's simple way of getting even after having had "half his clothes shot off" here on Uncle Jim territory. Truesdale no doubt had his own reason for picking that taut moment to inquire:

"How is the sheriff doing with his wound, Biddle?"

"Doin' fine," the reputy had to admit. "Soon be up—"

Henderson stood now against the windowsill. Bid Kettler reached in to snatch he fugitive's old range six-shooter from the holster. The fugitive acted with lightning-like swiftness. He seized the barrel of the deputy's gun and shoved it aside—it blazed and he howled, too late. Henderson then drove a fist to Kettler's jaw with the force of a mule's kick, sprang through the window and bore his antagonist to the ground.

The white-haired Truesdale in his diningroom, heard sounds of struggle and of blows in the outside darkness. Shortly after silence had come, old Holly and a sloe-eyed youngish man named Duncan Rader stole in by way of the kitchen. Rader was the UJ's fastest, best shot.

"Uncle Jim," breathed the dark-eyed scrapper, "I wish you'd let me take that cowboy from Kettler. I can do it."

"If we block the law, Dunc, even when it's in the hands of such a sidewinder as Bid, it'll mean trouble for us all."

Again there was a period of silence. It stretched into long minutes, and more long minutes. Then Henderson came in. He was alone, and his six-shooter was in its holster; his knuckles and face were bruised, his mouth had bled a little. He took his hat from the floor, put it on, and spoke to the old cattleman:

"The hippopotaymus is headed back toward town. I don't like to fight law, Uncle Jim, but I did want to live awhile longer. Sure am obliged to you for feedin' my horse and me. I'll go now, like you said I'd better."

Truesdale's lips moved stiffly. Henderson's ears caught words that had a strange ring. *"All the cards were black."*

"What do you mean, Uncle Jim?"

"I think I'll tell you something," Truesdale said. "Bid Kettler has been working on my past, trying to cross me up with the law; claims I was a worse hellion than any man

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I've got here. He figures, you see, it'll count in his landing the job of being sheriff. He knows old-timers who used to be sidekicks of mine, and has offered them fancy prices if they'll turn on me and talk. No luck, of course, but—Kettler may succeed anyhow."

Henderson frowned. So that was why Uncle Jim couldn't sleep. It had to be serious. Truesdale was talking again:

"You're worn down, cowboy. My advice is, go to Wib Trigg's shack in the desert and rest couple days there. I'll give you directions for finding the place."

FAGGED clean to the marrow of his bones, Henderson did not ride all the way that night.

Trigg's shanty stood only a few miles inside the desert rim, but it was so well hidden in the rocky wilderness that the fugitive from Nueva Mex didn't find it readily in the daytime, Truesday's explicit directions notwithstanding. The desert man's horse was nowhere in evidence. Henderson had just put his sorrel to cropping grass at the water-hole edge when a weak voice came:

"Hola, amigo! Venga aqui!"

Henderson ran to the shack. Inside on a crude bunk he found Wilbur Trigg, pale under his old bronze, his face pinched and bleak with suffering. He burst out:

"I thought you must be a Mexie," and hurried on, having recognized the newcomer: "Oh, cowpoke, I never was so glad to see a hooman! 'Peared like I was jest goin' to hafta lay here and die by inches. The bone cuts the meat and she hurts to beat hell."

"I see," the newcomer muttered—"leg busted below the knee. You need a drink. Got one?"

"No got, cowpoke," said Trigg. "I was nearly here last night, comin' from town, and went to sleep in the saddle. My hoss spooked and throwed me, and that's what busted her. And the fool hoss, which I'd swapped fer last week, it run off back home and so I had to drag myself in."

Henderson gave him water. He wanted nothing to eat. "Now," the cowboy said, "we must get you to a doctor fast, or you'll be losin' the leg with gangrene. I'll bring my sorrel."

He put the old-timer into the saddle, with the broken limb dangling. It was not comfortable. But he saw nothing else to do. Then he placed the split rein in Trigg's hands, got up behind Trigg, took the rein and they started. The desert man said:

"Y'won't need to take me to Redondo; hafta shoot it out with Bid Kettler, if you did. Jest take me to Truesdale's, and he'll send a man high-tailin' it fer the doc. I sartainly am a heep obleeged to you. Looks sorta Providential, you findin' my shack that way, cowpoke."

"Yeah, maybe so," the cowpoke said.

THE pace was necessarily slow Noontime was past when they sighted the rambling big house on the UJ spread. Half an hour more, and Henderson was carrying Wilbur Trigg into the livingroom. He put his burden down gently on an ancient couch, then said:

"Rest as easy as you can while I look up Uncle Jim."

But after ten minutes he returned to the old-timer to say that he hadn't been able to locate Truesdale or anybody else, and was going out to the range to find a rider and send him for the doctor. The words were scarcely past his teeth when a heavy rattle of footsteps came from somewhere at the rear. Neither Truesdale nor Holly would walk like that. Henderson glanced at Trigg, put up a warning finger, and tiptoed swiftly into a livingroom closet. He left the door open an inch and watched through the aperture.

Then there were heavy footfalls on the front gallery also. Soon half a dozen men, weapons drawn, had met in the livingroom and their leader was Deputy Bid Kettler; the other five were of a nondescript riff-raff breed that he had picked up for a posse. The six had left their horses behind creek trees a rifleshot distant, and had skulked in on foot as a surprise move. It was just as well that they did not know the sorrel cow horse at the front.

"Where's Truesdale?" Kettler demanded savagely of Trigg.

"Ef I knowed," the desert prospector answered weakly, " I wouldn't tell a sidewinder like you. My leg is busted all to hell. I don't want no truck with you. Git outa here!"

The deputy bent and seized the *viejo* by a shoulder and shook him brutally. Trigg

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went a ghastly pale from this new pain. The deputy began, "So I'm a sidewinder—" and Trigg interrupted:

"Bid, old Jim has befriended hunnerds of pore desert rats like me. Grub-staked 'em, fed 'em, clothed their neckidness, even prayed fer some as they died, and buried 'em respectable. You hurt Jim Truesdale, and them old-timers—us old timers— will bring the wrath o' the Almighty down—on you—"

He was close to fainting. Kettler said, "Also I'll find out from Truesdale where that young Nueva Mex outlaw is. I aim to clean this county up proper. Savvy?"

This colossal mistake of Sheriff Hart Bailey's then holstered his gun, and the five men with him followed suit in apelike unison. Kettler continued:

"Trigg, you and Jim was from the Sawtooth country, as you know. Back there a long time past was a powerful smart and heap dangerous outlaw knowed as Red Wolf on account he had sandy-red hair and beard, nobody knowin' his real name. Finally, word went around that the Wolf was dead. Which likewise ain't news to you.

"Well," Kettler proceeded, snake-mean eyes gleaming, "Red Wolf didn't die. His right name was Truesdale. I've had a deputy in the Sawtooth country findin' out things, and he jest rode in with certain witnesses. I aim to swamp the court with proof. And so, Wib Trigg, if you don't own up the whole truth about Jim Truesdale, I'll see that you go up as a accessory. You *git* me?"

No reply. Biddle Kettler made as if to seize the *viejo* by a shoulder and give him another brutal shaking. Behind him a closet door eased open and into the livingroom stepped soundlessly a tall young man with a leveled and ready six-shooter, and his eyes were filled up with fire.

"That'll be enough, rattlesnake!" Henderson rapped. "Now get 'em up fast, all of you, and I mean *fast!*"

The six obeyed. Henderson hurried to snatch their weapons one by one from holster leather and toss them into the closet. Then he back-stepped to the closet door, kicked it shut and locked it and took possession of the key.

He had barely finished that when footsteps rang on the front gallery. The next moment Uncle Jim Truesdale, Duncan Rader and old Joe Holly walked into the living-room. They had just ridden in from the range and had seen Henderson's sorrel at the front.

"What's up?" barked the old cattleman.

In few words the Nueva Mex cowboy told him. Truesdale turned to Rader. "Dunc, ride a streak to Redondo after the doctor for Wib. Holly, get cold water and bathe Wib's leg."

The two men vanished. The bullet-headed chief deputy whined:

"My hands is tired. I cain't hold 'em up any—"

"Let 'em down but be damned careful what you try to do with 'em," interrupted Henderson.

Kettler said, a few seconds later, "Truesdale, I've jest brought witnesses from the Sawtooth who will tell the court enough to hang you. I'm here to arrest you on charges of some stickups and killings. You aim to buck the law?"

UNCLE JIM'S face had gone almost as white as his hair. If Henderson had entertained an idea to the effect that the chief deputy was bluffing, the idea would have perished then.

"I heard you sent a man to Sawtooth," muttered Uncle Jim.

There was a brief flurry of hoofbeats outside, and soon afterward the high sheriff walked into the UJ livingroom.

"Hello, Hart," Truesdale said warmly. "Glad to see you're so much better of the damage that rustler slug did you."

"Thanks, Jim," said Hart Bailey. "But I don't feel good yet. It was a case of having to get out regardless."

His eyes swept the group twice and came to rest on the outlawed cowboy. With his gun still ready, Henderson was still master of the situation. The sheriff made no move toward his own six-shooter. He said:

"I met Dunc Rader. He was traveling so fast that I hardly had a chance to ask what was wrong."

Kettler was for explaining. Henderson silenced him and himself explained. Bailey said, "And so, Nueva Mex, you were safe away, then brought Trigg here and ran into Kettler. It's something in your favor. You, Bid, listen:

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"You may get enough of certain kinds of votes to balance the sheriff job over to you next election, but you're sure not sheriff yet. To send a deputy over to Sawtooth spying on the past life of the best man in a thousand miles of here—"

Truesdale cut sharply into that. "Don't let it worry you, Hart. I'm glad you've come, Hart, because now I can surrender to you and not to Bid Kettler."

"Surrender all you want to, Uncle Jim," Henderson cried almost with the suddenness of a gunshot, "but fight the case to a ragged frazzle! Sheriff—I've got somethin' to say to you. But first I'd like to tell you I'm no criminal; *you* woulda done the same thing that outlawed me in New Mexico. All right, here's what I wanted to say:

"I'm hopin' I can somehow help Uncle Jim, and I'm askin' you for a truce until after his trial; I won't run off, no matter what. If you don't agree to the truce, I'll high-tail right now!"

"Truce, the devil!" roared Bid Kettler. "Hart, you know who that smart buckaroo is, don't you?"

SUDDEN physical weakness had sent Hart Bailey to a chair. He answered his chief deputy. "I don't know too well who he is. Howsomever, as I just told you, Bid, I'm still top law dog in this county, and I agree to the truce the stranger asked for—and what do you think of that!"

"Thanks, sheriff," Henderson said quickly.

He gave the closet key to the senior officer, ran outside, then was in the saddle and galloping his sorrel cow horse off toward the desert. Oddly, perhaps, his mind turned backward, and kept turning backward, to something Jim Truesdale had said.

All the cards were black.

Truesdale rode to town with Hart Bailey.

After long silence, the sheriff said, "Jim, maybe you wonder why I don't kick Bid Kettler out. For one thing, it might make him stronger with the bad element. For another, I'd rather have have him where I can halfway watch him. And I'm beginning to figure him to be the sort that will hang itself if only I give him rope enough."

"Wise," said old Jim Truesdale.

After Henderson had ridden well out of sight from UJ headquarters, he reined his sorrel abruptly leftward for the purpose of looking up the camp of Pete Destin, kingpin rustler.

HART—for goshsakes, come out here!" It was the Redondo City liveryman, who stood hammering on the front door of the Bailey home with both fists, just at dawn of the day set for the trial of Ulysses James Truesdale, alias Red Wolf, outlaw of twenty years before.

The officer was still putting on clothes when he appeared in the doorway. The liveryman said breathlessly:

"Thought you ought to know quick, Hart. Last night the town filled up with old-timers from deserts, mountains, plains, and everywhere else, and they're all for Jim Truesdale. And what a collection of shootin' hardware they've got—old dragoon Colts, brass-bound Winchesters, muzzle-loadin' buffalo guns—the *viejos* is set to take Truesdale from you, Hart, in case the trial goes the wrong way; don't y'see?"

To Bailey this was bad news. To even think of shooting into the ranks of those ancients was a shame. Their loyalty and devotion to old Jim, the friend who had fed and clothed and sheltered them times without number, amounted to a religion.

But there had to be law, and it must be upheld.

The officer hurried to the vacant-lot camps of the hard-bitten, scraggly-bearded old-timers. He noted the bright fire in their squinted eyes. Joe Holly, ex-outlaw, was apparently the high light of this little, phantom army. He listened respectfully enough to Hart Bailey's plea for law observance, then said in reply:

"The Almighty made some laws too, sheriff."

Deputy Kettler had spent the night with his Sawtooth country witnesses, in the upstairs of Redondo City's little hotel. He was bent upon making sure that they did not change their minds as to swearing that they'd been aboard a Butterworth stagecoach on a day long gone when Jim Truesdale had stuck it up and killed the passenger who showed fight. Elderly, they were, of course: The stage-driver, a hard-rock miner, and the keeper of a cross-roads store.

The four were no more than fully dressed when New Mexico cowboy Hen-

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derson appeared among them. He was dust-stained from hard riding, his bronzed face was starved lean. Biddle Kettler said, with a cold sneer:

"I see you're back, smart cowboy. I reckon it was you rounded up them old coots out there."

"No. But they're fixed to give you trouble in bunches," Henderson said, and kept going: "Kettler, I'm advisin' you to send these three jiggers here high-tailin' right now, before the trial is called and the old-timers swing into action. Anyhow, your three didn't want to testify in this. You had to browbeat 'em, and pay real cash besides. I found that out the same way I found out some other things. Listen, Kettler:

"I'd got the idea that you was the star cow thief of this county yourself, and that it was you who shot the sheriff in the back —you wanted his job, y'know, so's to work in with rustler big business. So I joined Pete Destin's outfit, and little by little I learnt that my hunches was correct. Pete even whispered to me that you used a rifle in dry-gulchin' Hart Bailey, the shot bein' too long for a six-shooter. But the main thing, it's this:

"I found cow folks who knew Truesdale years ago. They said his buck-wildness was his whole trouble; said crimes was put at his door because law dogs didn't know where else to put 'em—and Truesdale, daredevil, wouldn't bother to deny anything! When he told me, *All the cards were black,* I couldn't figure what he meant. But I can now, and I've got black cards o' my own. He meant that Fate had dealt him a tough hand, that's all.

"The cow folks," Henderson continued almost hotly, "had the correct angle. It just had to be that way!"

In this he was right, so right, as Truesdale swore to him afterward. Biddle Kettler had gone ashen. Pete Destin, who had always been hard to control—Pete had talked, beyond a doubt. Desperation gripped the chief deputy. Wild-eyed, he cast about him as though picking out an avenue of escape; and suddenly he mumbled an oath.

His three Sawtooth witnesses were gone!

And then Biddle Kettler snaked his weapon from leather and rapped bleakly—"You'll go to Hart Bailey with that, smart cowboy—" his six-shooter howled— "like hell you will, you—"

"Stop it, Bid!" came blasting through from the passageway.

The voice of Hart Bailey, that was. He sprang in between the two. The guns of both were smoking and the cowboy's was ready to smoke again. The deputy shrank sidewise with a reddening right shirtsleeve. Henderson said:

"He pulled first, sheriff, and woulda got me if I hadn't dropped under."

"Yeah," Bailey said, twisting Kettler's weapon from his hand; "happens I saw it. Also, I heard plenty of the talk. Look, Bid. Cattle associations of two states are going to run Pete Destin and his outfit into *Mejico.* I don't like bothering with rats, so I want you to leave. But if you ever come back—"

He had unloaded Kettler's gun. He ripped off the deputy badge, returned the empty six-shooter. The ex-lawman hurried to the street and got his horse, and rode southward out of town.

The grapevine worked fast with news to the effect that there would be no trial. On their way to the sheriff's office, Bailey and Henderson noted that the little army of old-timers, the phantom army, was melting away silently. Jim Truesdale sat near the scarred desk; he was beaming, seemed very happy indeed. From a pigeonhole Bailey took a circular letter that had come to him from a sheriff in New Mexico.

"Fine thing you did, Henderson. Foolish, too, maybe, to take the blame for a killing as a favor to a sidekick whose dad was about to die. Well, he proved to be a friend after all: owned up after the funeral, and cleared you. And the jigger he shot had threatened him, so it's possible he'll be cleared himself. I reckon, gents, we're all three in line for congratulations!"

"Right," Henderson said through a wide grin. "Uncle Jim, seems that the black cards all showed up as aces, don't it?"

"Certainly does," Truesdale said, voice not quite steady. "Be glad to have you on the UJ for keeps, cowboy. You—er, yes? *Bien!* Then leave your fagged sorrel with the liveryman for the present, and go out with me in the buckboard." His old eyes twinkled finely as he added, "And I'll drive fast to make the wind blow."

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Dead Men Do Tell Tales

COOLER weather indeed! *Santa mia Madonna!* The weather man was out of his head. He had been dropped as a *bambino*, and not on that portion of his anatomy that had been plumpest at the time. It stood to reason the heat wave would continue. Was this not New York? Was this not August? As for himself, as certainly as his name was Giovanni Lorenzo Garibaldi Fabriano Bianco, Papa Bianco hoped it would grow even hotter.

A big man given to flesh, he lay next to Mama in the early dawn thinking of his garden growing hourly more beautiful and fragrant in the small yard back of the restaurant. Where tin cans and ashes had been before he had made a thing of beauty. And now—with the beautiful birthday present from Mama. Papa Bianco's bulk quivered with emotion and he patted Mama's most convenient bulge tenderly before turning on his side to stare impatiently at the graying bedroom window.

The night noises of Greenwich Village had died away and the familiar sounds and smells of morning were beginning. There was a fragrance of freshly made coffee and frying onions. He could hear a faint tinkle of milk bottles and an occasional scuff of feet on the walk as some early rising laborer made his way to the subway. Dawn followed

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By DAY KEENE

the swish of the water truck up Sullivan Street. A new day had begun.

The window fully grayed, Papa Bianco eased his bulk from the bed in a great creaking of springs. A devout man his first act of the day was to make his devotion before the image of the Virgin. Then he waddled barefooted to the open window, the long tails of cotton nightshirt dangling limp and damp around his ankles.

Truly the world was well conceived. After night had served its purpose God dropped a smile into the juke box of eternity and another day rose dripping from the ocean to revolve on the turntable of time. His roses, larkspur, hollyhocks, marigolds, snapdragons, and gaillardia, had never been more beautiful. He examined the thermometer nailed to the outside of the sill with interest. Even this early in the morning the mercury was well up in the nineties. It would be another growing day.

Dressed he tiptoed in elephantine silence down the inside stairs leading to the ground floor restaurant. The darkened restaurant was fairly cool and aromatic with the lingering odor of good food. Putting a pot of coffee to boil he drank his morning glass of

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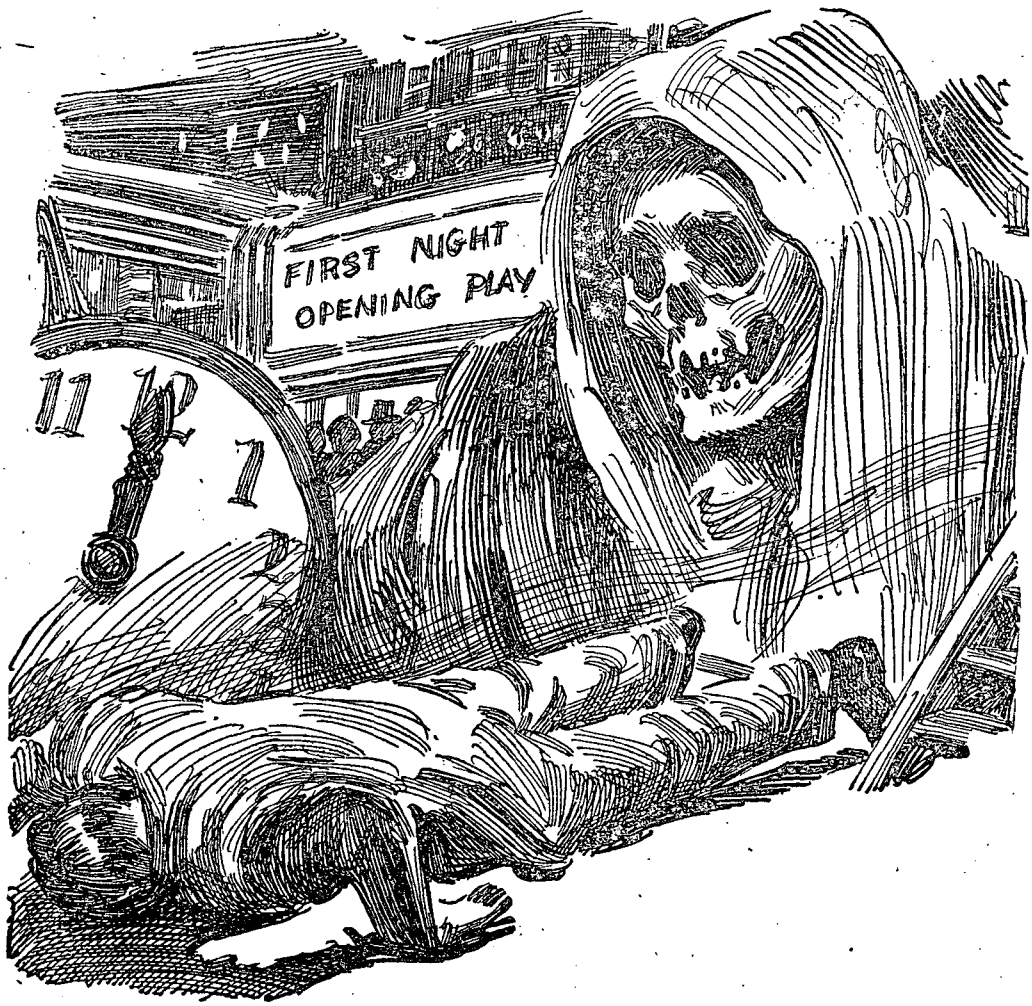
"Always in Twos and Threes Are Killings Coming!"



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brandy then caught up with his books by thumbing through the signed food checks Mama kept on a spike on her desk.

Good. Young Vardell's tabs were gone. His one man show had been a success. He had sold at least one picture. *Tch, tch, tch.* But young Martin was still getting rejection slips instead of checks. And now he was into Mama for rent money.

The *Signora* Betty Carson, too, was still embarrassed. Papa Bianco thumbed through her tabs and breathed a fervent prayer the show she was currently rehearsing would be a huge success. *Cristo Madonna.* Where did a slim little thing like that put so much to eat? It was truly fortunate he and Mama served dinners only. With any more such variety of patronage he would have to close his doors.

FINISHED with his coffee he unbolted the kitchen door and walked out into the yard that was in reality little but an air well for the remodeled cold water tenement whose walls rose sheer on three sides of it. Mama's present was in the narrow shed he had built to house his garden tools. The sack was warranted to hold two and one cubic yards and squatting on his fat haunches Papa read the fine printing under the picture of a sad and frustrated looking bull:

> This Steer Manure is Warranted to Be Free of Noxious Weed Seeds. Gathered From Cement Floors. Produced from Steers Fattened For Beef Market Which Have Been Fed On Cotton-Seed Meal and Hulls and Especially Prepared for Lawns, Shrubs, Flowers, and Gardens.

Ah, Beautiful Mama. This would make things really grow. He started to open the sack then got to his feet with the effortless ease peculiar to some fat men as the first of Betty Carson's screams filled the well.

Locating the source of the screams, he gasped. *Mia Madonna.* It was the *Signora* Carson standing in the open window of her first floor apartment. And she was as innocent of clothes as she had been the day she had been born. Now Mrs. Levy in the flat across the way was leaning out her window. She looked first at the *Signora,* scandalized. Then she, too, saw the object at which the younger woman was looking and added her screams to those of the blonde girl.

Now other heads were thrusting out of windows.

Remembering her nudeness, tardily, the blonde girl wrapped the window drape sarong-wise around her middle and screamed at Papa Bianco. "There's a dead man in your garden."

The words failed to register it. It sounded to Papa Bianco as if the blonde *signora* had screamed there was a dead man in his garden. But such a thing obviously could not be. He tipped his garden hat politely. "*Perdonatemi?*"

"There is a dead man in your garden," she repeated.

His ruddy face paling, Papa Bianco strode through the tiny grape arbor under which he occasionally served meals to favored customers and stared in horrified silence at the object to which the young *signora* was pointing.

It was as she had spoken. There was no doubt the man was dead. He lay face down on a rose bush. The back of his coat was sodden with clotted blood. Papa Bianco made no attempt to turn the body so he could see the face. Such an act he knew was against the law. Instead he appealed to the faces staring at him now from every window opening on the air well. "Would someone please be so kind as to inform the police a dead man is despoiling my garden?"

II

THERE was the usual noon hour crowd on Broadway but few of the heat-ridden passersby, with the exception of a group of out-of-town housewives on a conducted tour, paused to watch the culinary experiment about to be performed on the public walk in front of Findy's.

It was worth watching. Two fried eggs with toast and atmosphere would have cost a dollar and a half on the air-conditioned side of the plate glass window. A roly-poly little man wearing a wilted chef's cap, Findy looked from the egg in each plump palm to the cameraman. "Come come. Make with the pictures, boys. So in this heat I am

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holding these eggs two minutes longer and they hatch."

One of the small group of men standing under the shade of the awning, a silver-haired little man with a twinkle in his eyes, suggested, "Now there is an idea for you, boys. Make him hold the eggs two minutes longer and you can caption the picture—Findy Becomes Mother During Heat Wave."

Findy gave him a dirty look. "Always to me such things are happening. It couldn't be I am being ribbed?"

"Who ever heard of a fried egg hot foot?" the other man asked him sober faced.

A camera man slipped his slide from his camera.

"Okay, Findy. Bust 'em."

Stooping with an effort Findy broke the eggs on the walk. The beat policeman stopped to watch. "I'm a son-of-a-un. They're cooking."

There was no reason they shouldn't. Heat rose in shimmering eddies from the walk. It beat down from a cloudless, brassy, sky. It was reflected from heat-soaked tons of steel and concrete. The eggs on the walk begin to shrivel at the edges, then congeal.

A camera man suggested, "Now put the spatula down on the walk and make like you're turning them, Findy."

The restaurant owner attempted to comply but was balked by his waistline. "Better you should raise the sidewalk," he made a counter suggestion.

In the laughter that followed the guide conducting the out-of-town housewives made the most of his opportunity. "The man frying the eggs," he told them sotto voice, "is Findy the famous restaurateur. The big man behind him is Flip Anders the war correspondent currently producing a play he wrote out of his war experiences. The silver-haired little man with the big diamond in his tie is Silent Smith the gambler. He is reputed to be worth five million dollars, all of it made gambling."

Encouraged by their shocked clucking he pointed out Bill Morrow and Sam Eagan as Smith's seconds in command but few of the women heard him. They were still staring at Smith. He didn't *look* like a criminal type. A pleasant-faced little man whose washed-blue eyes were crinkled with laugh lines, he might have been a chain-store grocery clerk, if chain-store grocery clerks could afford to wear fifty-dollar panamas and four-carat square-cut diamonds in their ties.

The eggs on the walk turned brown. The camera men packed their cameras and talked pointedly of free beer. The patrolman, remembering his duty, ordered the sidewalk cleared. "All right. The show's over. Break it up, boys."

THE guide and the housewives moved on. Most of the men under the awning adjourned to the cool of the bar. Smith continued to stand under the awning his eyes bright with interest. Broadway was his street. He knew her as few men ever had. He had moved uptown with her and both he and she had prospered. His casino had run through a dozen administrations. His worst enemies admitted he was honest. His moral code was simple. A man was right or he was wrong. Boys were his hobby. He picked them off the streets and out of slums and gave them the education and the start in life that he had never had. To Smith a boy was a boy regardless of his color, race, or creed. There were no strings tied to his kindness. All he ever asked of his boys was that they keep their noses clean in whatever line of endeavor they might choose. It was a hobby that had payed big dividends. Sam Eagan was one of his boys. So was Bill Morrow.

A lean-faced man with predatory eyes, Morrow flipped the ashes from his cigarette. "You know," he said, "I think Flip is short of money and it might be possible to buy into his show."

Smith shook his head. "You can do as you like. I want no part of it." He disliked few men. He did dislike Flip Anders. In his opinion the former sports writer turned war correspondent and more recently a playwright was a heel.

"I'd give five to two," Morrow said, "that he has a hit on his hands."

Smith looked sideways at his second in command. "You wouldn't happen to feel that way about it, would you, because Betty Carson is playing the lead?"

Morrow grinned. "Could be. Betty is too young and pretty to stay a widow forever."

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"Your torch is showing," Smith told him.

A police car with Sergeant Devers at the wheel swung in out of traffic and parked in front of Findy's. His heavy face florid in the heat, Captain Craig of Homicide sat on the front seat beside the driver his small eyes flicking over the faces of the men standing under Findy's awning.

A few of the loungers found sudden business elsewhere. Most of the group merely raised their noses from their *Racing Forms* and scratch-sheets and stared back incuriously.

"Craig's up to something," Morrow said. "I know that look in his eyes. You haven't killed anyone lately, have you, Silent?"

The gambler furrowed his brow in mock thought. "Now, let me think."

Getting out of the car Craig crossed the walk and tapped Morrow's chest with a thick finger. "I want to talk to you, Bill. Where were you between the hours of two o'clock and six o'clock this morning?"

Morrow lighted a fresh cigarette. "Why should I tell you?"

Craig said, "Because you'll either tell me of your own accord or I'm going to take you down to my office and try a rubber hose on you for size." He looked at Smith. "And you stay out of this, Silent. The Department is up to here with you attempting to play God."

"So," the gambler admitted quietly, "you have told me several times. But what's all this about?"

Craig turned back to Bill Morrow. "You wouldn't know?"

"No. I would not."

"But you do admit you are carrying a torch for Betty Carson."

Morrow clenched his fist and Smith caught at his arm. "Easy makes it, Bill."

"You don't have to admit it," Craig jeered. "It's common gossip on the Street. You took her home last night. And while she denies it, of course, another one of her boy friends found you there. You quarreled with him, put two shots in his back, then dumped him out her window."

The younger man shook off Smith's restraining hand. "It's okay, Silent. I'm not going to hit him. I don't know what he is talking about. And I don't think he does."

Craig said, "I'm talking about murder."

"How interesting," Smith said. "Just like in The Naked City, eh? You're making like Muldoon. Now suppose you tell us who was murdered."

"The body," Captain Craig admitted, "has not been identified."

Several of the camera men seeing the squad car had pushed themselves away from the bar. Sergeant Devers joined the group under the awning. "You guys should have been there," he told the camera men. "It was really something. Any of you know Bianco's garden on Sullivan Street?"

Solly Marks of the *Telegram* said, "I do."

"Well," Devers grinned, "when we got there this morning there was Giovanni standing knee deep in snapdragons blatting his lungs out because this dead person has got himself murdered on top of one of the old man's favorite rose bushes. And in an open window just over his head was one of the cutest little blondes I ever saw wearing nothing but a frown and a diaphanous silk window drape. Boy. It was a picture in Kodachrome."

Marks set his camera case on the walk and kicked it. "And where was I?" Me, I'm taking a picture of two fried eggs.

III

PERCHED on the edge of her cot, Betty stared between the steel bars at the girl in the cell across the corridor. It had been a mistake on her part to tell Captain Craig that Bill Morrow had escorted her home from rehearsal. But how was she to know? She had never been involved in a murder before. Maybe Bill had killed him. She knew he carried a gun. He wore it in a holster under his left arm.

She got up and paced the cell then sat back on the cot again and smoothed the skirt of the black and white checked outfit the police had allowed her to put on. It wasn't fair to do this to her. She hadn't done a thing except see a body and point it out to Papa Bianco. She still blushed when she thought of it. That was what a girl got for sleeping in the raw. From now on, heat or no heat, she would wear her pajamas.

A key grated in the cell door and she looked up to see a big-busted police matron.

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"Up on your feet, dearie," she ordered. "You're wanted down in the captain's office."

Betty went with her glumly, wondering how many years she would get for discovering a body in the nude. The office seemed filled with men. She knew Bill and Flip and Papa Bianco and Silent. The gambler got up as she entered and gave her his chair. "Stop worrying, child. Your being held at all was a mistake."

Flip Anders glowered at Craig. "A foul mistake."

"I had my reasons for holding her," Craig said. "And by the way *you* didn't happen to be in her apartment last night, did you?"

"No," Anders said. "I didn't happen to be. I went there deliberately."

"When was this?" Morrow asked sharply.

"Right after you left," Anders said. "I dropped in to give Betty the cuts I made in the second scene of the third act."

Betty shook her straw-colored braids emphatically. "And I don't like them, Flip. I tried to phone you and tell you so last night, but you hadn't gotten back to your hotel yet."

Captain Craig pounded on his desk. "Shut up. All of you. Is this a play rehearsal or a murder investigation?"

"I'll bite," Anders admitted.

Morrow walked over to stand beside Betty. "Instead of picking on a defenseless girl why not throw me and Flip in a cell? We both admit we were in the apartment."

"I may do that," Craig told him. "Someone killed the lad and despite the absence of bloodstains I have reason to believe he was killed in Mrs. Carson's apartment." He leveled a finger at the blonde actress. "You use the name of *Mrs.* Carson. Where's your husband?"

There was a slight husk in her voice. "He's dead. He was killed in the South Pacific."

Craig's tone softened slightly. "I'm sorry. But this other man." He hesitated briefly.

"What other man?"

"The man who was killed. When you discovered the body, you screamed. Why?"

Betty was indignant. "What was I supposed to do? Applaud? You'd scream, too, if you looked out your window and saw a dead man on a rose bush."

Smith wanted to know if the dead man had been identified as yet. "Not yet," Craig admitted. "But I have a hunch once we have identified him it will be easy sailing." He looked at Morrow. "Why not save the Department a little time and admit you killed him, Bill? The whole Street knows you're carrying a torch for the little blonde, here. You were in her apartment last night. This other admirer came in while you were there. You've killed other men for less. So—"

Morrow took up the story. "So I shot him with my trusty pisolver. Then I picked up the body and threw it out the window into a garden where it would be certain to be found the very first thing in the morning. You know, you ought to write your deductions for the Crook-of-the-Month Club. They could pass it out as a dividend —Craig's Grim Fairy Tales."

Craig's jowls colored but he made no reply.

Anders said, "I think you're all wet in suspecting Bill, Captain Craig. How about Giovanni there? After all the dead man was found in his garden. And if he wasn't dropped or thrown out of any of the windows on the air well he had to come through Papa Bianco's place. How do you know he didn't kill him?"

Papa Bianco was shocked. "Not on top of one of my rose bushes, *signore.*" He raised his right palm. "No. This thing I did not do. I swear by the *Madonna.*"

"No one is charging you with anything," Craig said. "Not at the moment anyway. Just don't try to leave town." His scowl included Anders, Smith and Morrow. "All right. Get out, all of you. I know where to find you when I want you."

IT HAD been fairly cool in the building but heat filled the street like an invisible molten river. Silent Smith immediately became the hub of a wheel of clamoring reporters. "Believe me, boys," he told them, "I don't know a thing about it."

Betty tried to thank him and he told her she had no cause for gratitude. "All I did was throw my weight around a little. Craig couldn't have held you much longer without a formal charge. He had to either book you or release you."

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"Craig," Anders said succinctly, "is an Ass." He told the reporters. "And you may quote me."

Smith sighed as he relighted his cigar. Craig was no one's fool. He was holding something back. There was more to this than showed on the surface. He asked Betty, "You didn't recognize the dead lad, did you, Betty?"

She shook her head. "To the best of my knowledge I'd never seen him before."

Anders suggested, "Now that we're out of the mess I suggest that we stay out."

"I'm afraid we can't," Smith said. "We're all in something up to our necks. And it isn't rose petals." His smile was elfin. "Besides, I'm curious. I have heard a lot about a bed of roses, but this is the first time I've ever heard of a corpse being found in one." He motioned to Papa Bianco. "You, Bianco. I want to see where X marked the spot."

Anders' smile was wry. "Every man to his taste." He looked at his watch. "But we happen to have a rehearsal called for three o'clock. Think you can walk through it, Betty?"

"Of course I can," she smiled brightly.

Anders whistled down a cab and helped her into it. Bill Morrow looked after the cab like a lean greyhound deprived of a tasty bone. Smith said, "You have it bad, eh, Bill?"

"Bad," his second in command admitted.

Sam Eagan drove up with Smith's car. "Well, I saw the corpse," he reported. "He's not a bad-looking lad about twenty-six. Good clothes but four years out of style. Close-cropped black hair and either a prison or a hospital pallor. He could be either a recently released ex-con or an ex-service man who's fighting the war in a hospital since V. J. Day."

Smith turned to Papa Bianco. "You saw him, Giovanni. How about it? Did you ever see him around the Village?"

Papa Bianco raised his right hand. "This I swear to, *signore*. I never see this man before I find him making flat with his body the best rose bush I had in my garden. . . ."

MAMA BIANCO was standing in the open doorway of the restaurant. She hurled a stream of liquid Italian at Papa who answered her in kind, then braced himself to receive her as she threw her two hundred and fifty pounds into his arms. "She is think I am arrest for murder," he beamed. "And Mama is pleased this is not so." He patted a plump arm tenderly. "My little dove."

"While you and Sam are looking at the garden," Morrow said, "I'll talk to some of the tenants whose windows open on the well."

It was the first time either Smith or Eagan had seen the garden. A high white-washed board fence extending almost to the first floor windows of the remodeled tenement was banked with scarlet hollyhock and multi-colored sweet peas. In front of them a dozen other varieties of flowers bloomed in almost incredible profusion.

Smith removed his panama. "You're okay, Giovanni. You are also clear in my book. Any man who could plan and grow a garden like this couldn't kill anyone in it."

A uniformed patrolman sitting under the tiny grape arbor got to his feet and jerked his thumb toward the kitchen door. "Out back where you came from, chums. No one is allowed in here."

Smith was interested. "Is that so? Why? Did something happen here?"

The uniformed man stared at him suspiciously. "Oh, I make you now. You're Silent Smith the big-shot gambler."

"That's right," Smith admitted.

He studied the window Papa Bianco pointed out as the *Signora* Carson's window. It was at the far end of the well and in the opposite corner from the mashed canes of the ruined rose bush where the body had been found. There was no possible way the body could have fallen or been thrown from the window of the actress and landed where it did.

He turned to say something to Eagan and in the hot silence of the well the "spitt" of the silenced gun was plainly audible. The uniformed officer spun on his heel, tugging at his gun. Eagan was even faster. By the time the officer had fumbled his gun from its holster, Eagan had fired three shots through the open window from which the shot had come.

His eyes never leaving the window, Eagan asked how badly Smith was hurt. The gam-

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bler looked at the spreading stain on his upper arm. "Not too badly, I think." But it had been close, too close."

Excitedly chattering heads, most of them feminine, began to appear in the windows. Breathing heavily, Bill Morrow shouldered a woman aside and leaning out demanded to know where the shot had come from.

"Three apartments to your left," Eagan told him.

Morrow disappeared and was immediately replaced by Mrs. Levy. "Such a rudeness," she complained. "Without even knocking on the door he is coming in and pushing me out of mine own window." Then looking across the air well she called triumphantly, "And what was I telling you this morning, Mrs. Gleason? Always in twos and threes are killings coming."

IV

THIS high up, in his penthouse on the floor above his forty-story high casino, there was a breeze. Smith stood in the big French windows opening onto the terrace drinking it in gratefully as Habeus his valet tucked a crisp handkerchief in the breast pocket of this white linen dinner jacket.

The day had been both long and hard. He wasn't as young as he once had been. His wound fortunately, however, had proven to be more painful than it was serious. The bullet intended for his heart had cut through his armpit instead, plowing a nasty furrow on the inside of his upper arm.

But why shoot at him at all?

Turning from the French windows he studied his reflection in a pier glass. His bandaged shoulder bulged slightly under the linen of his jacket. It made him look like he had taken to wearing a gun, something he had never done in all his years on Broadway. He had seen the gunmen come and go. Broadway was a lusty man's woman but she had to be wooed, not violated.

Cork Avers, operating the cage in the private elevator shaft that served only the casino and the penthouse, showed him the headlines in the evening papers as he descended to the heat of the street. One read—

MYSTERY MAN
SLAIN IN LOVE NEST

There was a picture of Betty Carson and one of Bill Morrow on the front page. He read the caption under Morrow's picture:

Well Known Gambler and Bodyguard for Ulysses (Silent) Smith Admits Visiting Blonde Actress' Apartment Shortly Before Body was Found in Exotic Greenwich Village Garden.

The second paper headlined the fact—

SILENT SMITH SHOT IN
SEQUEL TO VILLAGE
LOVE NEST MURDER!

Smith returned the papers to Avers. "At my age."

Avers told him, "Sam just called in. And he says to tell you the F. B. I. has identified the lad found in the rose bush as former Staff Sergeant Henry Merriman. He was released from a government mental hospital two weeks ago. Now they are looking up his service record for more data."

"Good. And the apartment the shot was fired from?"

"Was Merriman's apartment. He rented it four days ago, paying a fifty-dollar bonus for that particular apartment."

Smith shrugged and walked on out to the street. The sun, no longer visible, was tangling with the taller trees of the New Jersey Palisades, but it was still light and still hot on Broadway.

The shooting bothered Smith more than he cared to admit. The would-be killer had risked much and gained nothing. It was almost a feline gesture, a frightened cat reaching out of the dark to scratch. The apartment had, of course, been empty by the time Bill Morrow had reached it. The deeper into the affair they got the less sense it made.

Passing the foyer of the Empire Theatre he hesitated, then walked into the darkened interior. It was like entering another world. Except for the dim exit lights the only light in the auditorium was a harsh, unshielded, work light on the stage. Flip Anders in his

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shirt sleeves was sitting at a small table near it thumbing through a script. White-haired Lydia Hope, once a star in her own right, was knitting. His lips moving soundlessly, old Mac Shannon was trying to memorize lines a tired brain rebelled to absorbing. A boy and girl he didn't know were leaning against the proscenium. The leading man's name, he believed, was Darcy. Betty was not on stage. At least Smith could not see her.

Halfway down the aisle he turned into a row and sat down as Flip, his fat face oily in the harsh glare of the work light, looked up from the script and called:

"All right, folks. Let's run through the last act again. Come on, Betty. We're waiting for you. And for God's sake, less tears and a few more lines this time."

Looking very frail and lovely, her young breasts straining against the thin white fabric of her blouse, Betty came out from behind a pile of stacked scenery blowing her nose vigorously on a wisp of handkerchief.

Smith didn't blame Bill for being in love with her. She was too young and too pretty to spend her life looking backward into a grave. He hoped she would marry Bill. Bill would be good to her.

"Places," Anders called. "Curtain. Take it away, Betty."

It was a love scene, exquisitely written and acted. The juvenile and ingenue came on. Then Shannon and Lydia made an entrance. Smith sat enthralled as the plot unfolded. There were few "clever" lines. There was none of Flip Anders' usual attempt at sophistication. It was as if the fat man in the work light had stripped his soul bare and examining it in the light of the horrors of war he had seen had written as a little child might have, a child gifted with adult mentality but without its weight of guilty knowledge.

There were no two ways about it. Bill had been right. Flip had a smash hit on his hands. The play couldn't help but be successful.

When the act was over he continued to sit quietly as Flip dismissed the cast with a curt, "That's all until tomorrow morning. Ten o'clock." Then leaving the theatre unseen he continued on up Broadway to Findy's. . . .

IT WAS the ghosts that bothered Lydia the most. A sharp tongue sufficed for the living. You could tell them it was none of their business or of course you were doing all right. But the ghosts knew better. They came in through closed and locked doors to find you cooking one pork chop on a gas ring. They opened your dresser drawers and examined your mended underthings. At night they made sleep difficult by sitting on the edge of your bed and reminding you of what had been.

But now she was working again, things would be better. The play was bound to be a success. It wouldn't hurt Flip at all to give her a small advance. She crossed to where he was standing by the work light. "I'll have to have some money, Flip. Say fifty dollars."

He opened his mouth as if to refuse the request, then taking a thin fold of bills from his pocket he counted a twenty and three ten dollar bills into her hand, saying, "If you really need the money I suppose I'll have to spare it. But that's all I can possibly spare until we open. Do I make myself clear, Lydia?"

"Perfectly," the former star said cheerfully.

It was a long walk to her tiny room in the old brown stone front on West 51st Street but it was always pleasant to window shop and dream of the things one could buy if one had the money to buy them. And she intended to have the money. *Ghosts get away from my door. Lydia doesn't live here any more. She has moved back to her old suite at the Waldorf.*

It would be nice to have expensive clothes again. She missed them so. A strolling sailor passed her, turned his head to look at her face, then walked on, grinning.

"The rear elevation," the former star thought grimly, "must still be all right. But, grandmother, what white hair you have."

She turned in at the Automat and ate a hearty supper sitting at a white-topped table. It wasn't fair to be both old and poor. She didn't mean to be poor any longer. Finished with her meal she walked on up the street, breasting the theatre crowd. In a few more nights they would be coming to see her again. And the play was bound to be a huge success.

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Findy's window was brightly lighted and Lydia knew a moment of regret. She should have eaten in Findy's. But when one had been poor for so long one forgot that such places existed. She paused and looked in through the glass. The tables were all occupied by prosperous looking men and expensively dressed women. Silent Smith, immaculate in a white linen dinner packet, was sitting at a table with two younger men she did not know. The former star sighed. This was her world. She loved it. She meant to return to it.

A few blocks farther up Broadway she turned and started down the first of the four long blocks she must walk before reaching her furnished light housekeeping room. This part of the walk she did not like. After she had passed Eighth Avenue there were few people on the street. There was nothing to look at.

The last block was worst of all. She was nearing the river now and warehouses and commercial buildings, their great doors closed for the night, were interspersed between the mouldering brown fronts. This was the last night she would walk it. In the morning she would move to a hotel.

Now there were no people on the street and halfway down the last block she started, frightened, as she thought she heard footsteps behind her, hollow, implacable, footsteps. She walked on even faster, a chill of apprehension tingling her spine. Perhaps she was being foolish. An old lady really didn't need much money. Perhaps she had best be content with the generous salary Flip was paying her.

It was completely dark now and she was grateful for the light that spilled out of the window of a small restaurant in the middle of the block. A taxi cab was parked at the curb. Its driver, a stocky man in his shirt sleeves, was sitting at the counter spooning sugar into his coffee and flirting with a blowsy looking waitress.

Romance in the fifties. Young love in bloom among the ash cans. Thank God she hadn't much farther to go. Her feet were beginning to hurt. Starting tomorrow night she'd stop this walking.

Behind her a car motor raced and Lydia glanced back over her shoulder. The taxi cab was moving away from the curb. The girl's answer must have been "no."

She fished her small purse from her knitting bag and fumbled in it for her house key as she started to cross the street. It was her last conscious act. She had a brief glimpse of a pair of unlighted headlights. Then the roaring mass of noise and metal struck her, tossed her frail body to one side, and passed on without stopping.

This was death. She lay a limp, silent, figure in the gutter, attended by solicitous ghosts.

V

BROADWAY called it the Judgment Seat. It was Smith's private table. No one ever used it but him except at his invitation. Fortunes had been made and lost across it.

Smith sat looking out the window. There was no abatement of the heat but night had brought an illusion of coolness. Doctors, merchants, lawyers, chiefs, rich men, poor men, beggar men, thieves, and their feminine counterparts, jostled by on the walk outside. *There is no other street like it,* he thought. That was because it wasn't really a street. It was a small world of its own. A world in which he had lived all his life. A sudden throb of the wound in his arm made him wonder what it would be like to leave the street forever.

Findy continued to try to tempt his appetite. "The Lake Superior white fish I can personally guarantee."

"No. I don't feel like fish."

"Borsch with thick whipped cream. Cold cuts and potato salad."

"N-no," the gambler decided. "I tell you what, Findy. Bring me two fried eggs."

Inarticulate with anger, Findy drummed on the table with his fingers until he could speak. "Ha," he said finally. "A joker. Two fried eggs, he wants. And on the sidewalk should I fry them?"

Bill Morrow beamed at the suggestion. "Say. That would be nice."

"I'll take the same," Eagan said.

"Eggs." The word strangled in Findy's throat. "Almost half a barrel of beer those *schlemiels* drink up on me. And what do I get? Publicity? My picture in the paper? Nu. They print a picture of a garden, a dead man, and a blonde *goy*. All Findy gets

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is everyone laughing and a fried egg hot foot."

He stalked away in stiff legged dignity.

Smith resumed his study of the passing crowd. Morrow added a chimney and a walk to the cottage he was sketching on the table cloth. Then he added a trellis for roses.

"Craig just came in," Eagan said.

"All this and Craig, too," Smith sighed.

The big homicide man came directly to the table. He was tired. Sitting down unasked he looked at Smith. "So you finally got burned."

"At least badly singed," Smith admitted. "What's on your mind?"

"It's still that affair down in the Village. Why should anyone shoot at you?"

"I mean to find out," Smith said. "Have you found out anything new?"

Craig ordered a glass of iced coffee. "Not a thing except this Merriman was a Denver newspaper man when he was inducted into the Army. He has no known relatives. And until two weeks ago he was confined in a government mental hospital with a service connected disability."

"We know that much," Eagan said. "We also know he offered the rental agent a fifty dollar bonus for an apartment overlooking Bianco's garden."

Smith said, "I suppose you've checked the tenants of the building?"

"Back to their babyhood," Craig told him. He scowled at Morrow. "And it may interest you to know your little blonde friend is completely in the clear. She seems to have a habit of stalking around her apartment a la Godiva, but only when she is alone. According to the other women in the building her morals are above reproach."

Morrow added a nursery to the cottage he was drawing.

Craig continued. "But that doesn't put you completely in the clear. The Medical Examiner says Merriman was killed shortly after three. And by your own admission both you and Flip Anders were in Betty Carson's apartment shortly before that hour."

Looking up from his sketching, Morrow said, "I didn't kill him. Believe me. I always hide my bodies far more cleverly. This hanging them on a rose bush is new to me. Besides I was back at my hotel by three o'clock."

Craig made an impatient gesture with his cigar. "The exact time of death is a guess. According to the M. E. there wasn't much in Merriman's stomach but whiskey and the best he could do was estimate the time. You sure you didn't kill him, Bill?"

"I'm positive."

"And you guys aren't holding out on me?"

"Why should we?"

"Why," Craig countered, "should anyone take a shot at Silent?"

"There," Smith admitted, "you have me."

Eagan suggested, "Maybe someone doesn't like him."

"Bah," Craig snorted. "How or why I don't know but you guys are in this up to your necks. And somewhere there is money involved. Merriman's buddy at the hospital says that Merriman told him as soon as he was released he had a hundred grand waiting for him on Broadway, all wrapped up in cellophane and tied with a big pink ribbon."

Morrow looked up to see Betty standing beside the table. Her eyes were swollen and red rimmed from crying. Standing up he took her in his arms. "Honey."

She tried to speak, and couldn't. Standing behind her, his fat face flabby with emotion, Flip Anders said, "It's Lydia. She's dead. Some damn fool cab driver ran her down. They found Betty's name in her purse and Betty phoned me at my hotel as soon as the police had phoned her."

"Lydia?" Captain Craig puzzled.

Anders told him, "My character woman." He looked at Smith for permission then sank into one of the chairs. "And there goes my show. The whole street knows I'm producing it on a shoe string. But now even the shoe string has snapped. I advanced Lydia fifty dollars tonight, half of what I have in the world. And we'll never be able to stick it out until we rehearse a new character woman. Well, that's show business, I guess. And me with a potential smash hit on my hands."

Morrow took the handkerchief from his breast pocket and gave it to the girl in his arms. "Here. Blow your nose. And stop crying, Betty. Crying won't do Lydia a bit of good."

Craig asked, "Did they get the driver?"

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"I think so," Anders said. "I'm not sure." He cursed softly under his breath. "Of all the damn bad breaks."

"Forget the money angle," Smith said. "I saw the third act tonight. And I'll buy a piece of the show, enough to see you through."

Captain Craig got to his feet. "How nice it must be to have money. Well, I'll see you all later, I hope. One or more of you in jail."

Still sniffing, Betty asked, "What did he mean?"

The silver-haired gambler studied the tip of his cigar a long moment before answering. "Craig means he doesn't like the way the game is going. Neither do I. An ex-service man is mysteriously murdered. An equally mysterious attempt was made on my life. And now a harmless old lady is run down by a taxi cab. For one of the few times in my life I can't figure the house percentage. The whole game is out of balance."

Eagan said. "As in a game where someone is using a pair of switch-dice, eh?"

"Exactly."

Betty wiped at her eyes. "I knew that you knew Lydia, and that you would want to know."

"Thank you my dear," Smith said. There had been a time when he had known Lydia well, when both of them had been young.

The young actress's fingers closed on Bill Morrow's hand. "Besides, I don't know why, but I'm afraid."

"Stuff," Anders said. Catching a waiter's attention he ordered a double brandy.

Smith got to his feet and shaped his panama to his head. "You stay with Betty, Bill. And write Flip out a check for however much he needs to carry him. You come with me, Sam."

"THAT'S him in there." The turnkey pointed to a cell. "He gave his name as Pepi Vieste when we booked him and his looks check with the picture on his hacker's license."

Smith looked between the bars. A stocky man in his shirt sleeves was lying perfectly relaxed on the steel cot suspended from the wall by chains. "So you're the lad who was driving the taxi, eh? Looks like you're in a bad jam, Pepi."

The stocky man turned his head on the clasped hands that were serving him as a pillow. "G'wan, fly cop. Blow. Scram. It's a bum rap, see? And you guys can't make it stick. I never run down no old lady. Check my record. I been hackin' fourteen years without no accident." He got to his feet in sudden recognition. "Hey. I make you now. You ain't no fly cop. You're Smith, the gambler. I seen you in front of Findy's lots of times. And once I drive you out to the Polo Grounds. His knuckles white on the bars, he asked, "Where do you come in on this?"

"The woman you killed was a friend of mine."

The driver beat on the bars with his fists. "I never killed no one." He caught at Smith's coat sleeve through the bars. "Look. Please, Mr. Smith. You've got the name of being a right guy. Maybe you can make the cops listen to you. Here's exactly what happened."

"Yes—?"

"I had the heap parked up on 49th Street, a couple of doors from where I am making a play for a waitress. A nice tasty little dish, see? There is no in the joint so I'm passing it out hot and heavy and someone up and steals my heap. I hear the motor and I make a dive for the door. But when I get there it is just rounding the next corner, the corner where they say I ran down the old lady. I don't even hear no screams, or nothing. All I know is that my heap is stolen."

"You went back and told the waitress?"

"Sure I did. I even called the station and reported the heap stolen on her phone. But on account of us being sweet on each other they say she is covering for me and we are acting in col—" He had trouble with the word.

"Collusion," Eagan suggested.

"That's the word."

Back in the lobby of the precinct station, Eagan asked, "Well?"

"I think I believe him," Smith said. "Let's go talk to Lydia's landlady. If the hacker's story stands up this isn't a hit and run affair. Lydia was deliberately murdered."

"Why?"

"I don't know. But I mean to find out."

The house on 51st Street was old. The

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river wasn't far away. The smell of mud and the docks mingled with the stale cooking odors in the hall and the gin reek of the landlady's breath. It was a hell of a place for a former star to have lived.

A slattern in her early thirties, the landlady said, "The police was already here."

Smith took a bill from his wallet. "I know. But I'd like to see her room if you don't mind. This isn't official. I'm merely an old friend of hers."

A door down the hall opened and a man thrust his head out and looked at Smith and Eagan. "You watch what you're doing," he told the woman. "The cops said not to let anybody in that room."

She looked at him with contempt as she stuffed the twenty dollar bill into the general location of where her brassiere would have been if she had been wearing one. "G'wan back to sleep, you drunk." She added in explanation to Smith, "My husband."

And this was where Lydia had lived. The room had been the front parlor when the crumbling old stone front with its patched plaster and peeling wall paper had been a mansion. There was a sagging bed, a curtained-off alcove for clothes, a two ring gas plate on a small table, and Lydia's sticker-plastered old-fashioned wardrobe trunk. It was difficult for him to imagine Lydia in the room. He preferred to remember her as she had been—one of the brightest stars in the Broadway galaxy. That had been forty, no forty-five years ago.

Her hair had been black as the ace of spades and worn in a profusion of curls that tumbled over one bare white shoulder when she was in evening dress. Diamonds had glittered in her ears and on her fingers. The young sports of the day, himself included, had fought for her slightest favors. Now she was a broken old lady lying on a slab in the morgue, none of her former splendor left and all of her many talents fled. She had been run down by a taxi cab on the eve of a possible comeback.

The gambler removed his hat. *Good luck to her and a long run in the new cast she had joined.* Turning to the slattern, he asked, "Miss Hope lived here long?"

"Two years," the woman told him. "Most of the time she was on relief, I guess. Then she got a job in some show. And to hear her talk about it you'd think she was going to move down to the Waldorf Astoria tomorrow." She straightened a grimy cretonne window drape. "All of a sudden this place was a dump."

"How about callers?" the gambler asked.

"The police ast the same thing," she said. She turned suddenly coy. "I said she never had any. But for another twenty dollar bill I might possibly remember something I forgot to tell them."

Smith gave her another bill. Tucking it in the hollow between her ample breasts she shut the room door and confided:

"You know this guy who was killed down in some garden in the Village?"

"Yes."

"Well as soon as I seen his picture in this afternoon's paper I says to myself I've seen that face somewhere before. Then I remembered. He's the same guy who walked Miss Hope home the other night and spent two hours in her room with the door closed."

"You're positive of this?"

The slattern said, "I am." She pursed her lips primly. "Because I don't run that kind of a rooming house. And if Miss Hope hadn't been such a good tenant and so old I would have banged on her door in a minute and told her to get him out of there."

"Well, thanks. Thanks a lot," Smith said.

Back out on the comparative cleanliness of the street, he sighed. It all just went to show a man. Police work was a good deal like gambling. A smart man kept putting in his ante and sooner or later he was dealt a possible winning hand.

THE first rain fell at eleven-thirty. By midnight it had grown into a summer downpour that flooded the streets and gutters and gurgled merrily in the storm sewers.

Papa Bianco accepted it with reluctance. There was nothing one could do about God's rain. But at the risk of being sacrilegious, he preferred to make his own. God's rain played hell with a garden. From the dry vantage point of his kitchen door he watched the two men in the dead man's apartment. They were literally taking it to pieces under the little silver-haired *Padrone's* directions. The *Signore* Smith was

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a stubborn man. The police had long since given up further search of the apartment as useless. Just what the *signore* thought he might find was difficult to determine.

The rain beating on the heat-soaked earth at the bottom of the air well made a Turkish bath house of the one-room apartment. A gray little terrier urging on two willing, if puzzled, hounds, Smith examined the floor, the walls, and even the ceiling of the dead service man's apartment. Somewhere there had to be a clue that would give him at least a starting point in his attempt to unravel the daisy chain of murder that had bloomed during the heat wave.

"If we knew what we were looking for," Morrow said, "It might be easier to find. What *are* we looking for?"

"I don't know," the gambler admitted. "But unless we find it I'll give you ten to one we'll have another murder on our hands."

"Whose?"

"I wouldn't know that either," Smith admitted. "All I know is that our killer is an amateur. He or she frightens easily and shoots when there's no reason to."

Sam Eagan sat on the wet window sill and fanned himself with the brim of his straw hat. "Well, there may be something here to connect Merriman with Lydia. But I'll be damned if I know what it is. What theory are you working on, Silent? He certainly wasn't, well, shall we say, a pick-up."

Smith shook his head emphatically. "No. Even the thought is ridiculous. There comes a time in every woman's life, even women like Lydia, when men cease to be important physically—they tell me."

"How about," Morrow suggested, "him being a son by some, er, unconventional marriage?"

"I doubt it," Smith said. "Lydia was sixty-eight. Merriman was twenty-six. That would make her forty-two when he would have been born. No. He wasn't her son and he wasn't her lover. But there was some connection. There had to be. And both of them knew something—knowledge for which they were killed."

"It sounds logical," Eagan admitted.

Smith paced the small apartment. It had been recently redecorated and there were no phone numbers written on the paper by the phone. No scraps of messages had been left in any of the dresser drawers. The technical squad had even vacuumed the rug and swept the residue from the fireplace without finding anything of importance to the case. The only clear fingerprints found had been made by the dead man.

"It beats me," he admitted finally. Sitting on the sagging day bed he fingered idly through the newspapers and magazines in the newspaper rack beside it. Beside the newpapers there were two detective magazines, two western story magazines, one popular digest, two weekly news periodicals, a *Variety* magazine, a *Billboard*, and a *Saturday Review*.

Eagan mopped at his perspiring forehead. "There's nothing here. We might as well get back to the casino. This joint is like a steam bath."

"Wait a minute." Struck by a sudden thought that quickened his pulse, Smith fingered through the *Variety* without finding what he was looking for. He had better luck on the Drama page of the *Billboard*.

"Found something?" Morrow asked.

Smith said, "I think so." He looked at the cover of the theatrical magazine. It was an issue four weeks old and stamped—

> This Magazine Is The Property Of
> The American Red Cross. Please
> Do Not Take From Day Room.

"What was that Captain Craig said Merriman told a lad in the hospital just before he was discharged?"

"That he had a hundred grand waiting for him on Broadway, wrapped in cellophane and tied up in a big pink ribbon. It sounded crazy to me."

"Like a fox. He was crazy like a fox," Smith said. "The kid knew what he was talking about. He had just broken the bank, gone for the house and made it, gotten rich overnight. Only he made a bad mistake in the way he tried to collect. Get me Denver on the phone."

"Denver?" Morrow puzzled.

"You heard me. I want to speak to the editor of whatever paper the kid was working for when he was inducted into the Army."

Shrugging, Morrow picked up the phone

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and when the operator answered he asked her for Long Distance.

VI

THIS high up the faint noises of morning on the street below were a ghostly blur of subdued sound. It was the first time Papa Bianco had ever been in a penthouse. Refusing Smith's offer of a chair he prowled the thick pile of the carpet from the huge grand piano in the living room to the flagstoned terrace of the set-back from which all of Manhattan could be seen, murmuring, "Nice," as he touched this and that object.

It was three o'clock in the morning. Sam Eagan, bored, and emitting great yawns from time to time, stood in the huge French windows leading out onto the terrace. White-faced and puzzled, Betty Carson sat with Bill Morrow on an over-stuffed low divan back of a marble-topped coffee table on which he was drawing one of his endless chains of cottages. Morrow added a chimney and a walk to the cottage he was drawing then looked across the room at Smith. "Well, you wanted all of us here. We're here. What's on your mind, Silent? What are we waiting for?"

"Captain Craig," Smith told him.

Papa Bianco stopped his padding. "The policeman?"

Smith nodded, "The Policeman. Craig said the Department was tired of me playing God so I thought I'd let them do a little work for a change."

Flip Anders set the glass of beer he was sipping on the floor beside his chair. "What's the idea, Silent? What do you mean, 'let them do a little work for a change'?"

"Pick up a killer, in so many words," Smith said. "You see I know who killed Merriman and Lydia, and why. And Captain Craig being the head of Homicide I thought he might be interested."

An uneasy silence followed the remark. Betty broke it by saying, "Oh. You know?"

"Yes," Smith nodded. "I know."

Morrow drew a few trees to shade the cottage he had drawn then began to sketch a post on which to hang a name plate.

Looking at Eagan, Smith inclined the back of his head toward the heavily draped window behind the chair on which he sat. "Make certain there is no one out on the small balcony, will you, Sam?" He explained to the others, "I'll never forget the time a killer waited out there for me. It was close, too close, that time. I wouldn't want it to happen again."

Parting the drapes behind the chair, Eagan reported, "No one out there," then returned to stand in the big French windows.

"You say you know who killed Lydia and the man who was found in Papa Bianco's garden?" Betty said. "How?"

The glambler told her, "I read it in the showman's bible, in other words the *Billboard*. It was right on the drama page." Picking up the magazine he had found in the ex-service man's apartment he read aloud:

> "This reporter has learned that 'Flip' Anders' new bid for literary fame, a short cast play called CONQUEST goes into rehearsal at the old Empire Theatre this morning with Betty Carson and Matt Darcy scheduled for the leads. Mac Shannon and Lydia Hope are also in the cast, as are Ginnie Ferrel and Albert Lee, slated for the juvenile roles. Although this reporter has not read the script the short cast and Flip's previous record of flops makes the new venture sound like a typical Flip Anders' one nighter—one night and it folds."

"I saw that," Anders said. "And I should sue the *Billboard*. I would if I wasn't so certain I had a smash hit this time." He got to his feet heavily. "Well, it was nice of you to ask me to be present at your little denouement, Silent, and damn nice of you to lend me the money to carry on until I can replace Lydia. But I have a hard day ahead of me tomorrow. So if you don't mind I'll read about it in the papers."

"Sit down, Flip," Smith said. "I must be getting old. I've been mentally deficient not to have seen this whole thing from the start. I should have known the moment I saw the third act of the show tonight. *You never wrote lines like that in your life.* I said. sit down."

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The former war correspondent continued to stand, both hands plunged into the capacious pockets of his coat. "I prefer to stand. Go on. What do you mean?"

"I mean you didn't write that show. I mean you stole it. I mean the dead lad, Merriman, wrote CONQUEST, and somewhere in France, because you were a big shot war correspondent, critic, and would-be-playwright, because he trusted you, he gave it to you to read, and when you heard he had been wounded and sent to a mental hospital, you stole it and claimed it as your own."

Anders voice was thick. "You can't prove a thing."

"No," Smith admitted. "I can't. But a few hours ago I had a long talk with the editor of the Denver paper for which Merriman was working when he was inducted into the Army. And what do you think he told me? That it was Merriman's ambition to be a playwright, that he had already written several successful one act plays and that practically his only social activity in Denver was his connection with a little theatre group."

Anders' whole body sagged. He looked like a captive balloon about to be collapsed.

"And that proves I stole the show?" he asked.

Smith continued, "Perhaps not in a court of law. But there should be points of comparison with Merriman's earlier works. You made your big mistake when you shot at me, and missed, Flip. You should have killed me or not have tried it. I was only curious until you made it personal. But like all amateur killers you couldn't let well enough alone. You had to attempt to cover tracks already covered." Smith looked at Betty. "Think, Betty. When we parted on the steps of the station house, Bill and Sam and I to look a Papa Bianco's garden, and you and Flip to attend a rehearsal, did you and Flip go directly to the theatre?"

The actress shook her head. "No."

"Stay out of this, Betty," the fat man warned her. "Smith has no right to question you."

She looked down at the cottage that Morrow was drawing, then back at the silver-haired gambler. "No," she repeated. "We did not. A few blocks from the station Flip remembered he had forgotten the script so he sent me on to the theatre in the cab while he took another cab to his hotel."

Smith's smile was wry as he corrected her. "While he made a bee-line for Merriman's apartment afraid we might find something to connect him with the case. Then when he saw me in the garden he lost his head and flipped a shot at me."

"But why?" Betty asked, wide-eyed.

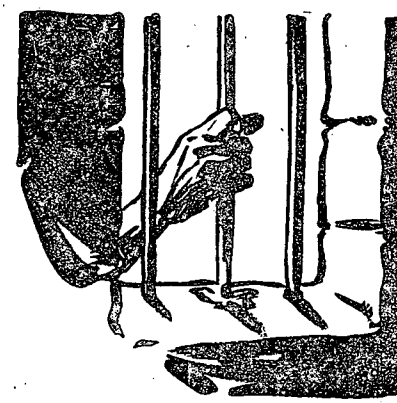
"He had already killed Merriman," Smith said. "He probably killed him a few minutes after he left your apartment that night. And his fat was a jumping bundle of nerves. He shot without even thinking of the possible consequences."

Papa Bianco spoke for the first time, his *mustachios* quivering with indignation. *"Per Bacco!* It was the fat peeg dog who keeled this man and despoiled my rose bush."

"Keep your shirt on," Eagan told him.

ANDERS took a quick step toward Smith and one hand coming out of his pocket held the snout of an ugly looking automatic to the little gambler's temple. "Tell Bill and Sam to shed their guns," he ordered.

Smith hesitated, said, "You heard him, boys."



"Toss them at my feet," Anders added.

"It would seem," Eagan said, "we have no choice." Slipping his gun from his shoulder holster he tossed it on the carpet at Anders' feet. Bill Morrow did the same, then began to print—The Morrows—on the swinging sign he had sketched on the post by the gate on the walk leading up to the cottage.

For all the emotion his face showed,

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Smith might have been dealing a hand of poker. "You won't gain a thing by killing me, Flip. And you'll never get out of here. Remember you're forty floors above the street."

Anders picked the guns from the carpet and dropped them into his pocket. "Oh, yes, I will. For all your poker-face you don't want to die."

"No," Smith admitted. "That's right. What's more, as I said before, I doubt if I have a case against you that will stand up in a court of law. But possibly Craig's blood hounds can smell one out. As I see it, Merriman had been hounding you for days, but didn't want to crowd you too far for fear you would pull the show, *his* show, out of rehearsal. Maybe he wanted to be recognized as the author of the piece. Maybe he wanted money. He knew he had a valuable piece of property and when he read that article in the *Billboard* he told one of his buddies in the hospital that he had a hundred grand waiting for him on Broadway, all wrapped in cellophane. Betty was the star of the show. He knew you visited her almost nightly to discuss matters pertaining to it. That's why he was willing to pay a fifty dollar bonus for an apartment directly across the way from hers. He could see you whenever you came and when you left he could stop you in the hall without anyone growing suspicious. But he stopped you once too often. He called for a showdown. And you killed him."

"Oh, Flip," Betty said. "How could you?" She began to weep softly on Bill Morrow's shoulder. He didn't seem displeased.

Smith continued, "Unfortunately for Lydia, Merriman also contacted her, undoubtedly because she looked like a nice old lady, a former star, who could advise him what to do about the situation in which he found himself. Maybe he couldn't prove he had written CONQUEST. He was fresh from a mental hospital. Maybe he was afraid if he came out openly and claimed to have written the show you would claim he was still crazy and have him locked up again. You were a war correspondent, a critic, a playwright, a Broadway big shot. He was just a G.I. with a Purple Heart, a mental hospital record, and a handful of battle stars." Smith puffed on his cigar. "Lydia brought what happened on herself. She was an old lady. She was tired of being poor. She wanted the pretty things she once had known. So instead of advising him to go to the authorities with his story she advised him to keep quiet for the time being. Then she told you that she knew and demanded a cut. That money I saw you give her tonight wasn't an advance. It was blackmail. She knew you had stolen the show. She knew you had killed Merriman. You knew you would never be safe as long as she was alive. So you followed her home from the theatre, stole that cab, and ran her down."

His voice thick, Anders said, "You can't prove it. No one can."

The little gambler was amused. "Then what are you sweating about? You're practically leaking at the seams." He started to get up from the chair as a fist rapped on the outer door. "Ah. That should be Captain Craig."

Anders jammed the gun against his temple. "No you don't. Sit down." Smith did as he was told. "I have to have time to think." His small eyes searched the apartment frantically, then settled on the drape behind the chair. "I'm going out on that little balcony," he said. "And if you had another similar experience that was close, it wasn't half as close as this one is going to be. My gun will be pointed at your head every minute until you get rid of Craig. Tell him anything you want, but get rid of him." He warned the others, "One peep out of any of you and I'll kill Smith. Is that clear?"

Eagan said it was. Papa Bianco made the sign of the cross. He wished he was back in his garden. Forty floors was a long ways above the street.

The fist knocked on the door again.

"Remember," Anders warned them. Then crossing in back of the chair, still keeping his gun pointed at the back of Smith's head, he parted the drapes with one hand and backed through them.

THE scream was faint and seemed to come from a long distance away. Betty looked up, startled, but before she could speak the outer door of the penthouse opened and Habeus came into the room carrying a large cloth-covered tray. "I knock but I guess you

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don't hear me," he told Smith. "I thought maybe you folks might be hungry. So I fixed up some sandwiches and such."

Smith's voice was barely audible. "Thank you. That was thoughtful of you, Habeus."

Betty continued to look at the drape. "That scream?"

Morrow tightened his arm around her shoulder. "The small balcony was merely in Flip's mind. That window opens into air."

She cried a little, then he head snuggled close to his chest, she sat looking at the sign plate he had drawn. It read—

The Morrows-

Then taking the pencil from his fingers she erased it and wrote in the words—

Two Morrows

Still dissatisfied she erased it and printed the promise—

Tomorrow

Smith rose slowly from his chair. He was tired. He was old. It had been a long day. He still faced a tough session with Captain Craig but justice had been done and he had been instrumental in it. With a glance at the sofa where Betty and Bill were wrapped in each other's arms he suggested to Papa Bianco and Eagan, "Suppose we have our sandwiches and maybe a spot to drink out on the terrace before I phone Captain Craig." He glanced at the sofa again and the smile lines came back to his eyes. "I doubt if we will be missed."

He doubted very much if they would be missed. Her lips pressed to Bill Morrow's Betty had stopped looking backward into a grave. It was life. It was Broadway, Smith thought. The old died and the young were born. The Street was a jealous mistress. To her a man was right, or he was wrong. The wrong ones didn't last long. The right ones lived forever. He raised his glass to Papa Bianco. "To you, sir."

"*Saludi,*" Papa toasted him soberly.

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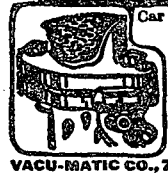

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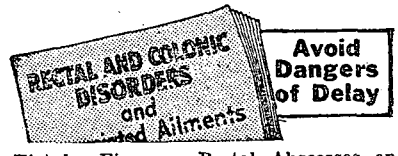

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The Story Tellers' Circle

Beyond the Continental Rim

AT THE moment the Arctic is practically a closed frontier. Beyond the continental rim, with the international situation being what it is, it's all very hush-hush with secret radar-weather stations and other joint operations by the RCAF and the USAAF going on.

Thusly, the Eskimo becomes something of "the man on the spot." About these interesting people, Keith Edgar ("The Mountie and the Sorcerer") writes:

"To me, the most fascinating people on the face of the earth today are the still primitive and self-sufficient tribes of Eskimos living beyond the rim of the Arctic and who thus come into little contact with trading posts. These, fortunately, have been blessed with enlightened missionaries (if at all), notably the wonderful Oblate Fathers and Church of England missionaries who really set out to understand and help these people. The RCMP, of course, are always in there doing their many-sided work with typical down-to-earth efficiency.

"But the interesting thing about these Eskimos is the fact that they are woefully ignorant of any sense of insufficiency. It just never occurs to them that they might be in need of guidance, either spiritual or otherwise. It is always startling for a white man to find that a primitive race considers him inferior—and that is just what the Eskimo figures. He calls the white man a kabluna, *which means bluntly, a foreigner. You know how all of us feel about* foreigners—*a bit smug and superior.*

"However, if you consider the Eskimo's point of view you get a new perspective. He lives in the most inhospitable land on earth. No one else covets it, so he has never been subjected to invasion or war. He hears about

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these phenomena, and chalks it down as just another sign the kablunat are crazy.

"Furthermore, the Eskimo knows that darned few white men can travel or even exist in his country without (a) learning his ways and emulating him, or (b) soliciting his help. He has stared in wonder at 'expeditions' which require shiploads of material merely to travel a few hundred miles in his land. When he *travels, he travels light and picks up food and clothing along the way—it's there, isn't it?*

"Shamanism exists because of a peculiar characteristic of the Eskimo. He does not normally lie. He can be mighty evasive, particularly if you want him to do something which he has no intention of doing. But a direct flat lie is simply foreign to his nature.

"Thus, when a more 'progressive' member of the community announces that his spirit has travelled to the moon (a favorite excursion, incidentally) and if he tells an imaginative tale in line with what the Eskimo knows *about the moon, he is believed.*

"What does the Eskimo know about the moon? Well, what do you know about radio? You know *that voices come over the air and are reproduced in your living-room. You* know *that this is done by electricity. Try and explain it to an Eskimo. Similarly, he* knows *that there is a man in the moon, that this man in the moon has a job—to keep the lamp in the moon burning to provide light for the hunters on the earth. He* knows *that the man in the moon has to get some rest once in a while and that he can't sleep in such a bright light—hence the dark of the moon. But when he tries to explain this to a white man, the crazy kabluna comes up with a lot of ridiculous arguments purporting to prove differently. Has the kabluna ever visited the moon? There, now. Right here in this tribe is a man who has made many flights to the moon. Does the kabluna know anyone personally who has made a flight to the moon? Then how can he* prove *his ridiculous statements, when their shaman has actually talked to the man in the moon? Is that not proof? At this point the know-it-all white man usually gives up.*

"This also is one of the reasons why the white man's mechanical wonders do not impress the Eskimo very much. The kabluna

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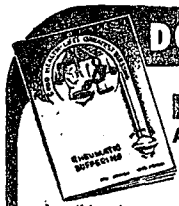

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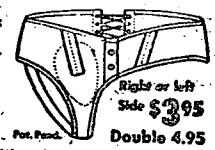

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builds a great big metal bird to carry him around in the sky. The Eskimo needs none of that nonsense. He sends his spirit off on a flight without any silly mechanical encumbrances. Is the kabluna then superior? So he builds great iron ships. Doesn't he think the Eskimo could build such ships if he wanted? Doesn't the kabluna understand that the Eskimo has no need of such ships? What would he put in them?

"In the face of such logic, rare indeed is the white man who can maintain his feeling of superiority, especially when he needs the Eskimo to guide him over a difficult trail. Especially when he can not live in that land at all without adapting himself to the Eskimo's way of life.

"Whether it is his environment or not, the Eskimo is the most peaceable being on earth, and the friendliest. He will readily pack up and take his family along on a two or three hundred mile trek if he happens to like you and wants to give you a hand. But if he doesn't like you or such a trip just doesn't appeal to him at the moment, all the bribery on earth won't change his mind.

"Sometimes I wonder if our 'civilization' isn't a bit over-sold."

—KEITH EDGAR

One More Murder

"Without wishing to bore anyone too much about how short stories have their beginning in a man's mind," says author Richard H. Watkins, "may I rise to remark that 'One Murder Is Enough' started some sixteen hundred miles from its actual locale in New England. And it turned out to be about, not two other guys, but only one.

"I became interested in the character of a carpenter down on the beach in Florida. He didn't seem to be much of anything until he tied on his apron, ballasted it with nails and started swinging a hammer. Then he changed; he was confident, sure, quick with the mouth and quicker with the idea. He could make wood sing and he knew it and enjoyed it. He fitted. He called himself a wood butcher but he was anything but. However when he laid down his hammer and shucked the apron he faded into a tenth carbon copy. Bashful, quiet, looking for the nearest exit, a complete background character.

"What would happen to a fellow like that if he got into real trouble, something a hammer wouldn't mend? Crime, for instance. I started kicking the notion around. Certainly he'd be helpless. Or would he? Was there anything in carpentering that would carry over to help him in a supreme moment of peril?

"The story grew but the carpenter I was thinking about didn't fit in it. I tried making him a motor mechanic and he began clicking. But then Florida started moving north on me. Before I finished the story was about a chilly spring day up in New England. I dreamed up a villain and somebody to tell the story and that was that, or rather it was 'One Murder Is Enough.'"

—DICK WATKINS

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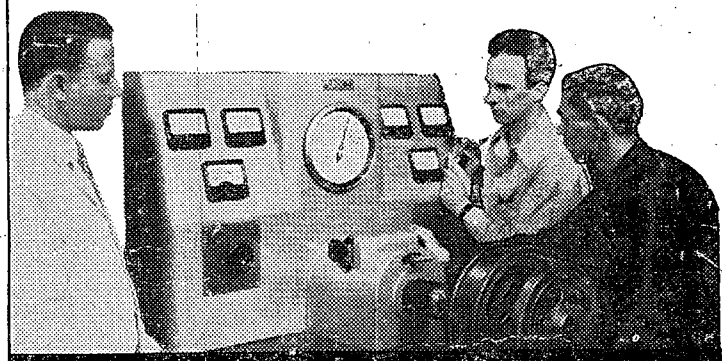

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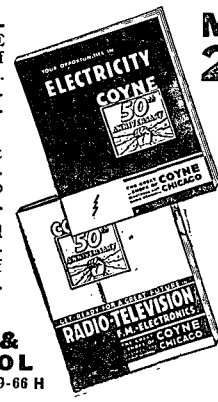

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